WDL

Zane Grey's WESTERN

No. 21

TWO COMPLETE NOVELS

Comanche John in

THE FASTEST GUN THAR BE

by Dan Cushman

RANGER BREED

By Bob Obets

2/-

"Whoopee!" shouted Comanche John. "Hoorah for La Belle!"

The Fastest Gun Thar Be, Chap. 6

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NOVEL (complete)

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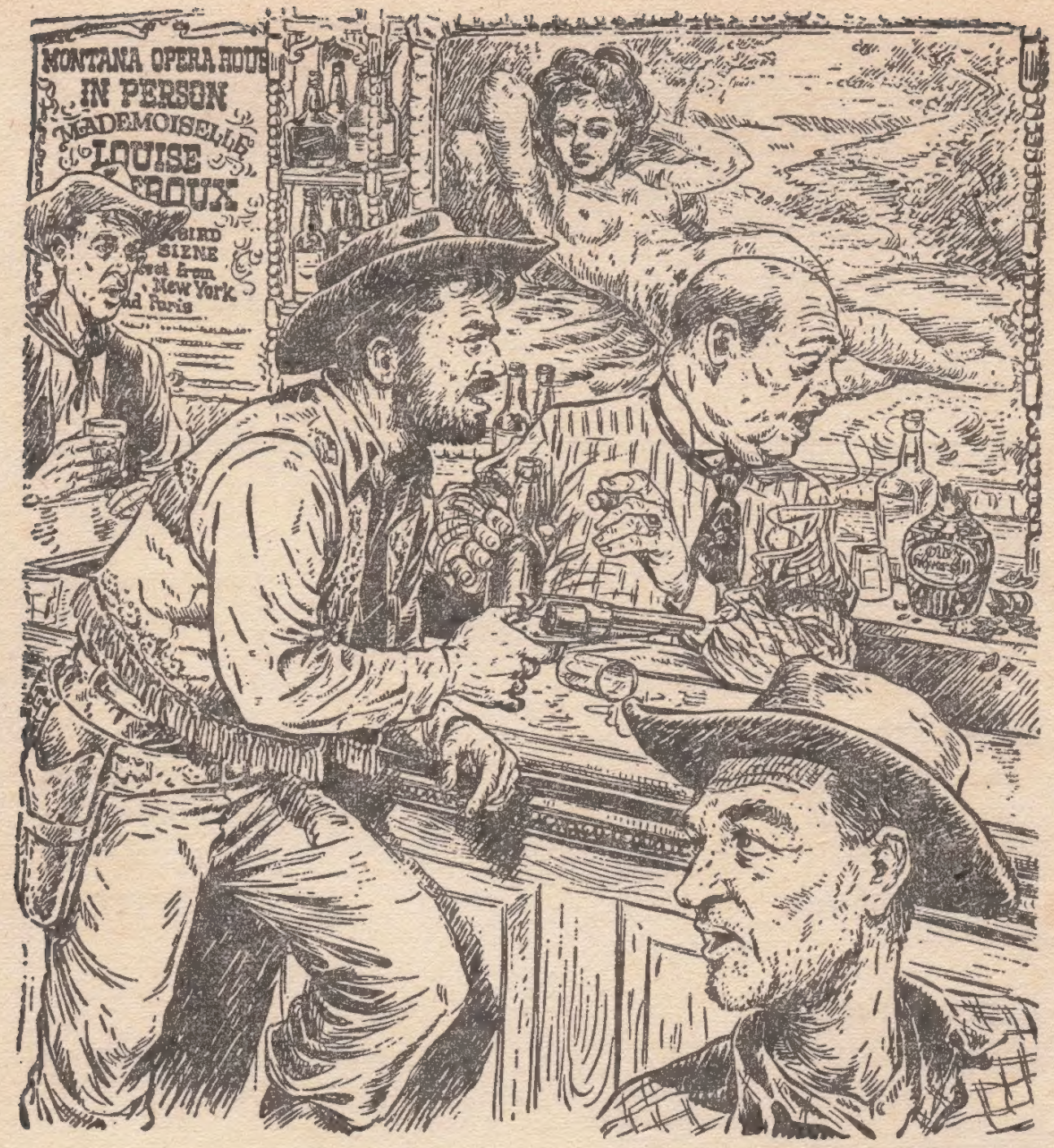


A faster shootin' highwayman you seldom ever see than Comanche John! But when he tangles lines with a scoundrel named Walker Malloy it looks like he'll die of rope croup this time for sure—until the old Comanche invokes a portion of the law never gone into much by Blackstone. It's called the Colt Statute—and it has six sections, with no appeal from any of them. . . .

A NEW COMANCHE JOHN NOVEL

The Fastest Gun Thar Be

BY DAN CUSHMAN

CHAPTER ONE

El Dorado Bound!

THE COACH DRIVER was a tall, loose, red-moustached man much fortified by three big slugs from the station-keeper's bottle. He climbed to the seat of the Concord and shouted:

"Git aboard or git left behind! It's ho! for the gold fields of Shauvegan, El Dorado and Chiny Gulch and I'm half an hour late already!"

In response, ten passengers crowded inside and an eleventh, a middling broad, black-whiskered man, maneuvered himself and his brace of Navy Colt pistols to the hurricane where he got placed with his jackboots on the seat between the shotgun guard and the driver. Gee-hawing the lines which ran far out across the backs of his six-horse team, the driver shouted, "Let 'em ramble!" at which the breed lad holding the leaders let go and dove for his life. "Ya-hoo!" shouted the driver, standing and swinging his long lash, and the horses, freshly hitched for the pull up Moosehorn Pass, almost jumped out of their hides and were off at a run with the coach wildly careening behind them. Never were more than three of the coach's wheels on earth at once, and at times not any, but still the whooping driver urged them on; the whiskered man and the guard held tight, and the scene inside the coach was one of scrambled and cursing humanity.

After half a mile, with some of the vinegar burned from his team, the driver eased back, handling each horse just so with his double-handfuls of ribbons until they were all pulling right and the coach rocked along behind them easily as a hammock.

They had entered a deep gulch with forested mountains rising to bald pinnacles on each side. There were evening shadows, an evening chill sharpened by the fragrance of pine, and the black-whiskered man shivered and tied the fastenings of his buckskin jacket.

"That Bannack City highlife was nigh the finish of me," he said. "Regular meals, sleeping in a bed I tell ye, it softens a man up. All very well when you're young, but when ye get to crowding forty, *no*. Especially when you're crowding it the wrong way." He hitched his Navy Colts to a more comfortable positions, aimed a spurt of tobacco juice at some rocks projecting from one side of the road, and asked, "At what o'clock will ye rise the Chiny Diggings?"

"It'll be black as a gambler's heart when we make the top of the pass, and the Redwillow and Sulphurwater are both high. Last trip I was half an hour at Sulphurwater hunting a crossing. I'd say we'd hove the diggings by midnight. That's the *diggings*, though. You're bound for New Boston. New Boston is five-six mile further along."

The coach splashed across a shallow

stream and started up-grade on a road dug from the loose sandrock of the mountain. Making himself comfortable with one boot on the brake the driver rolled his eye at the shotgun guard and added: "Yep, midnight, *if* we don't meet up with road agents."

The guard, heavyset and truculent, said, "This is an *in*coming coach. Who the hell would be crazy enough to rob an *in*coming one?"

"Did at the Yallerstone this spring. Banks in the country now. Banks bring in greenbacks. And I hear that Comanche John has moved in here from Idaho."

The guard knew he was being needled, but he could not help bristling back, "I hope that braggart *does* try to rob my outfit sometime. I only *hope so*." He whacked the eight-gauge shotgun between his knees. "Because if he does I'll hit him with a quarter-pound of number two buck and turn him so the hair side's in."

The black whiskered man said. "Comanche? Ye mean he's an Injun?"

"No Injun. Pike County white man, if you can call Missourians *white*. Dirty bushwhacking, killing, robbing, wooly-wolf!"

The driver said, "Robs from the rich and gives to the poor."

"Hah!"

Whereupon the driver got his chew of tobacco off to one side and lifted his voice in song;

"Thar's a forty-dozen highwaymen
'Twixt Denver and the sea,
But I sing of old Comanche John
The fastest gun thar be;
He robs the bank, he robs the stage,
He robs the Union mail,
And he's left his private graveyards
All along the Bannack Trail."

The black-whiskered man said, "That was *purty*. Can't believe a man could be so bad and have such a song written about him. Would ye mind singing some more?"

The guard shouted, "No, don't sing any more! That damn song'll end by driving me crazy. Anyhow, it don't make no never mind because the Comanche is dead. I heered he was hung by the vigilantes over in I-de-ho City."

"That's what I heered too!" said the black-whiskered one. "He's low in his grave so nobody needs to be looking for him, and that's a relief. That *is* a relief!" To prove that he blew his breath and removed his black slouch hat to wipe away some imaginary perspiration. "But I *would* like to hear some more of that song."

So the driver tuned himself with a couple of false starts and sang:

"Co-man-che rode to Yallerjack
On the twelfth day of July,
With chawin' tobacca in his mouth
And killin' in his eye,
Upon his head an old slouch hat
And boots above the knee,
A faster shootin' highwayman
You seldom ever see.

"Now Co-man-che had a pardner
By the name of Whisky Ike,
And the only motto that they had
Was share and share alike;
They robbed the coach at Uniontown
They robbed the—"

"Quit it, quit that caterwauling," cried the guard. "I got to look and listen both on this job.

The driver still ruminated the song under his breath for a while, then he said to the black-whiskered man, "I don't want to be misunderstood, but

that description of the Comanche does cut you right down the middle."

"I'm just a poor pilgrim on the trail of life. Brown's the handle. John Brown, and no relation to that varmint they hung at Harper's Ferry. Besides, as ye say, the Comanche is low in his grave at I-de-ho City—"

"They hung him in Yankee Flats and in Placerville, too. By grab, I never see a man that was hung so often as that Comanche John." He rolled an eye on the jittery guard. "How about you, McCabe?"

"He try to rob my coach they won't need to hang him."

Darkness settled gradually throughout the two-hour pull to the crest. Topping it they could see dimly, by a glow from the west, a vast timber and mountain country, the snowy summits of the Gold Creek Range to the northeast, and straight away, some miles below, a tiny twinkle of lights.

"New Boston?" asked the whiskered man.

"No, New Boston is hid in the gulch. That's the Irish Bar, a bench placer. Torchlight, work night and day. Git the gold out fast and turn the country back to the Injuns, that's the ticket!"

The coach entered timber and started down a steep drop with the brakes rubbing. It was very dark there. The driver had a hard time keeping his leaders moving fast enough, while the swing team, more than willing now that the pull was over, threatened to tangle the harness. There was a sharp turn, and the leaders suddenly came to a stop with the other horses all crowding them.

The driver cursed fluently, managing the lines with one hand and putting his weight on the brake with the other. The shotgun guard, on his feet, peered ahead, and the whiskered man, sensing danger, moved crablike back across the hurricane with the thought of escaping over the side, but a voice, high-pitched and obviously disguised, came from the blackness of the mountain bank close beside them;

"Hands up!"

The guard, after freezing for half a second, started around with the shotgun. There was a flash of powder, the deafening crash of a gun exploding at close range, and he went down, stomach across the seat, knees on the foot-rest.

Frightened, the horses tried to bolt. There was a log from the bank across the road that turned the lead team. The driver gee-hawed and cursed and got the horses stopped without going off the road where the coach would surely have capsized on the steep side of the mountain.

"The guard, he's going to fall," said the black-whiskered man, hands raised, the bandit covering him. "You better let me grab him."

"All right, but you reach for your guns I'll blast your innards clear to Hangtown."

The guard was wounded through the chest and bleeding rather badly from the region of his right armpit. The black-whiskered man managed to drag his 180 pounds up the seat to the hurricane where he rolled him face down and held him.

A man, disguising his voice with a French accent, came alongside calling to the passengers, "Stay een-side. Firs' man out I keel. Firs' man try potshot I reedle whole coach weeth buckshot."

There were others in movement, dim shapes in the darkness marked by the shine of pistols and shotguns. A light appeared. It was a tin-can lantern with air vents top and bottom and a door

that opened to give light or closed to conceal it as the occasion demanded.

The man carrying it issued a few low orders. Obviously he was the leader, and the black-whiskered one watched him on that account. He wore a blanket to hide his clothes; a handkerchief was pinned to the brim of his hat. *All* of them wore blankets and masks. After a brief conference the leader stepped back and stood very erect watching three of the others pull mail sacks from the boot.

"Cut 'em open" he said in a low voice, and they slit the sacks one after another with their bowies and strewed letters and parcels over the ground beneath the lanternlight. It was apparent they were looking for one bit of mail in particular, and finally it turned up in the form of a large, starched linen envelope with dabs of wax around the flap.

"That's him," said one of the men indicating the name with his thumb.

"Better open it," said the leader.

The man tried but the stiffened linen was very tough. He made with the bowie but the leader checked him saying, "Later," taking the letter and putting it away inside his blanket, and inside his shirt, too.

The black-whiskered man, leaning over the side of the coach, looking directly down on the envelope, muttered "By grab, if that didn't look like the Parson's name." That first big letter was the same, he was sure of that, and that next big one was a fish hook, and the next was a loop-ended ramrod which he *thought* was named P., and that *could* add up to be the Reverend Jeremiah Parker.

"How about the strongbox?" one of the men asked. "What a hell of a gang, take paper and leave the strongbox."

So they dumped it off and spent some time with a prospector's pick chopping the lock off.

"Greenbacks?" one asked as its contents were pawed.

"No, not a damn thing. Hold on, here's some watches. By doggies, I'm not leaving a box of fifty-dollar watches."

"Yes, flash one and end on a hangrope. Let's move."

The lantern went out. There was low talk back and forth. Someone was leading saddlehorses down the steep bank to the road. Men were leaving, but still guns were there, watchful for trouble. Then those left, there was a clatter of departing hoofs, and everybody in the coach commenced shouting at once.

"It's the Crow Rock Gang," one of them said. And another, "The Crow Rock nothing, they don't get *this* far from Idaho, that was Dutch Hymie and Little Bob," but the driver quieted them all:

"No, it warn't the Crow Rock gang and it warn't Dutch and Bob, neither. What do you back-easterners know about hold-up men, anyhow? I tell you I been robbed by 'em all. You see that one yonder in the black hat? The way he stood there, spread-legged? And the way he held those Navies! Tell you there's only *one* man in all the West holds his Navies like that, and that's the rippingest, rearingest, shootingest ya-hoo that ever came up the long trail from Californy. Yes, gents, he was nobody else than the one and only Comanche John!"

Chapter Two

"Raised on Catfish and Corn Likker"

THEY ROLLED down the dark, winding road with the guard band-

aged and resting easily on top of the coach, the whiskered-man attending him, and the driver singing in fine spirit:

"Oh, halter up your pony
And listen unto me,
Whilst I sing of old Comanche John
The fastest gun thar be;
He was born back in Missouri,
'Twas in the County Pike,
And whenever he draws his twin Navees
'Tis share and share alike.

"He had a pal named Jimmy Dale
And one called Dirty Bob—"

"Make him quit it!" whispered the guard, trying to struggle up while the whiskered-man restrained him. "That bushwhacking Comanche, if I—"

"Waren't the Comanche. I'll *guarantee* ye it waren't the Comanche!" And added to himself, "Ought to know, because I'm the Comanche myself!"

They reached the stage station at Sulphurwater where the shotgun guard was put to bed. There Comanche John left the coach, purchased from the station-keeper a fair looking bay horse and a Pennsylvania saddle, paying over a heavy poke of Bannack gold dust without haggling over the outrageous price, and as the stage rolled on he was also on his way, at a trot and gallop through the night, following a cut-across toward the mining camp of New Boston.

The bandits, he reasoned, were local or they would not have been so carefully masked, they were not ordinary robbers either, or the strongbox would not have been an afterthought, nor would the passengers have gone untouched.

"By grab, I wish I could read!" he muttered, riding up a timbered gulch, holding wire-hard pine branches away from his face. That envelope—he was certain it had been addressed to the Rev. Jeremiah Parker, the same Reverend that had plucked him from the black gulch of sin more than a twelve-month ago.

Half an hour of hard riding put him at the crest of a ridge. There he paused to let his horse breathe and had a look around. New Boston was yonder, but the gulch poked deep into the hills, and he had a hunch they had gone that way. For men on horseback it would be shorter and easier, and it was always a good idea for a highwayman to be in camp looking innocent when the coach arrived.

Pushing hard again, he rode cut-across toward the diggings. It was downhill for a mile. He crossed a tiny creek oily-yellow from placer mining further up, then he wound through pine-covered hills toward a saddle in a ridge, the only easy passage available for several miles.

He reined in, They would surely come this way. He freshened his chaw. He sang a bit of that pesky Comanche John song that the mule skinners had made up about him—all eighty-nine verses of it about *him.* He got one jack-boot hooked around the saddlehorn for comfort and looked long across the country. It was bright with black shadows under the moon, and no movement anywhere.

He was about to ride on when the note of a man's voice touched his ear, a voice very distant but still distinct through the night clearness, and looking back and across the saddle, half a mile away, he saw the moving shapes of horsemen, eight or nine of them—or perhaps even ten, he couldn't be sure.

He rode, keeping among the pines,

staying just so far ahead as the moon rose slowly through clouds like curdled milk, and midnight approached.

The riders found a trail and turned from sight into a gulch. In the distance he could see a line of torches—a placer mine. This, he decided, was Shauvegan Gulch or the Chiny Diggings, either of which would lead to New Boston.

He made his decision then and spurred to a gallop, reaching the gulch ahead of them. He found a well-traveled trail and gambled on them taking it. He waited among pines, heard the click-clack of hoofs, a voice or two. He waited.

A horseman rode into sight, then another. No masks nor blankets now. Neither, he thought, was the leader, though he could not be sure. He let them pass. They were hidden by timber down the trail with their companions not yet in sight. He spoke to his horse, nudged him with the heel of one jackboot, and rode out, falling in behind them.

He maintained a slow jog, letting the next rider overtake him.

"That you Hoss?" a voice said. "How the tarnation—I thought you was behint me."

Instead of answering, John lifted a hand in response and let the man come up to him. He was tall and slouched with hair that fell round his shoulders and a stringy, blond moustache. He was scarcely a long reach away when he suddenly realized that this was not "Hoss"—that indeed it was not even one of his associates. He reined up and started for the Navy at his hip, but with a sag of his right shoulder Comanche John had already drawn, and the gun was cocked and aimed,

"No don't lift your hands. Just keep riding. That's it, right beside me. Now, whar's the envelope?"

"I don't have it."

No, he wasn't the leader. He didn't have his erect manner either.

Two others were coming. "What's the trouble, Huck?" one of them asked, and he *was* the leader.

He came at a trot still not realizing that anything was amiss until he caught the shine of light on the drawn Navy.

The man's response was sudden. He spurred, reined sharply around, and went for his right-hand gun. His companion coming up behind him got in his way. A horse reared, a man was dumped to the ground, a horse bolted, crashing through brush toward the creek.

Darkness and melee made Comanche John momentarily lose track of things. Then he saw the leader with his gun out and spurring forward he clubbed the man from the saddle,

He holstered his Navy, swung to the ground, held his lunging horse with one hand and ripped the man's shirt open with the other, and there was the envelope, bent the shape of his chest, warm from contact with his body. He twisted it into a roll, thrust it inside his belt, and remounted as the leader coming to, started getting to his feet.

John, fighting his frightened horse, made a flash appraisal. Down the gulch he would have to ride through open moonlight. In the other direction men bore down on him, but it was dark, and darkness suited his mood. He spoke to the horse, "Git, dang ye!" and spurred.

"That's him!" a man was braying. "That's him right among you!"

He bent low as a gun exploded with flame bursting in his face. He could feel the wind whip of passing lead. One

ear was deaf and ringing. He bumped another horseman. He was in the open. Guns exploded behind him and he answered, twisted about in the saddle.

A man grunted, cursed, and cried, "Damn you, Step-and-a-half, don't ride me down!"

There was moonlight, a stretch of open trail. He did not enter it. He pulled in hard almost making his horse fall. The creek, through willow brush, murmured below. Hanging to the neck of his horse, hat over his face, he plunged through the tangle of bushes and found himself deep in the creek.

The horse struggled to carry him. There was sand and a deep hole by some old logs. Water flowed cold through a rent in one boot the same boot he'd had repaired in Bannack. He cursed the shoemaker and kept going with a steep bank on both sides and bushes bowering above.

Men were above him, to the left. He could hear them, sometimes no more than long spitting distance away, but the brush and their own noise saved him. There was a low place on the other bank, he turned his horse and climbed it, rode across a gravel bar, down through the swamp of an old beaver dam, a place fragrant of horse mint where mosquitoes rose in shadowy clouds so he had to beat them from his hands and face.

He reached some flats. It was easy going. He maintained a steady trot. Sound of pursuit had vanished. There was a blessed night quiet and the envelope making a satisfying bulge in his belt. Ahead half a mile burned the pitch torches of a placer mine—a deep cut, a bank of gray-white gravel, a headbox, some sluices on high piles, a lookout's shanty, men standing by their wheelbarrows still looking, wondering what the shooting had been.

"I do hope this be the Parson's envelope," he said. "I *do* wonder what the tarnation would be in it that'd cause 'em to mighty near pass up a strongbox to git to it!"

Chapter Three

Not the Marrying Kind

THE ROAD LED HIM on a winding course among the cuts and gravel heaps of placer mines to New Boston where the coach had just rolled in.

He took a back street among shanties, tents and dugouts, beneath a flume that dripped on him, through a ramshackle Chinatown with its peculiar smells and its banners hanging over the street.

He rode warily, his black slouch hat down over his eyes, his Navies with their butts out in easy reach, but he met no one, and finally he reached his destination—the rear door of a long log structure with a makeshift steeple.

He opened the door and spoke into the darkness, "Parson! Parson, be ye thar? It's Comanche John."

"John, John!" the Parson cried, startled from sleep. "Here, let me feel of you." He came barefoot, groping and felt him up and down. "Yes, it *is*. Oh, blessed day! I read in the Salt Lake paper that they'd hung ye dead down in Idaho City."

"Yes, and tomorrow ye'll hear that I robbed the New Boston coach."

"John, ye didn't! Ye haven't gone back to your old ways of wretchedness!"

"Don't worry about me, Parson. I ain't no fair weather Christian. When I hit the sawdust trail I hit her hard. So help me, I haven't tooken a single

coach except maybe one with some Union gov'ment payroll, and I wouldn't have touched *that* only for the war, and I seen it as my patriotic duty to the Confederacy. But I did get something off that coach tonight. This envelope, and it war addressed to you. Leastwise thar be a capital fishhook and a capital loop-end ramrod like I seen often enough at the for'ard ends of Jeremiah Parker."

The Parson blew a pitchpine twig to flame and carried it to a candle. He was gaunt and old. His legs which protruded from his night shirt were all tendons and bone. Gray hair fell to his shoulders. He had a long neck, a pointed Adam's apple, a sharp, high nose, and a pair of protruding eyeballs. "Like a plucked buzzard," as John had remarked in his more unflattering moments.

"Letter for *me*?" The Parson took it. "From St. Joe. The Hon. Eborum Black. Why, that's the lawyer. I know what this be. This is the gov'ment deed to our end of White Pine Valley."

He broke the seals and tore the envelope flap loose taking out a stiff, folded square of parchment ornately inscribed by hand, sealed with gold and wax. "Why, this be the original grant made to the Western Fur Company. See thar —1846! And look at whose name's signed—James J. Polk, President of the United States!"

"So that's it!" said John spitting his satisfaction at the ash hopper. "So that's why they was after the coach. That's a mighty valuable paper, Parson. If you and them Kansas pilgrims value your homes I'd hide that someplace. I'd hide it *good*"

"It ain't for me to hide. It's for Ambrose Stocker to hide, and we better take it to him tonight."

Stocker was the leader of a group of emigrants that Comanche John had guided over from the Snake River side last autumn. This valley of theirs, the White Pine, into which flowed Chiny, Shauvegan and El Dorado gulches, had been purchased from the executors of the old Western Fur Company at bankruptcy proceedings in St. Louis before they set out. That, of course, had been the Parson's doings. The Parson was a great one for bringing in wagon trains of flat-broke farmers and plowing up the West establishing homes and all that, and John humored him even though he knew nothing would come of it, that late or soon they'd all move out and turn the country back to the Indians.

When this group arrived before snowfly the fall before, the nearest settlements were at Hell Gate and Hangtown, but scarcely had they made camp when rich gravel was struck in Chiny Gulch, and then in Shauvegan and El Dorado starting a stampede so within a matter of weeks the gulches were staked from White Pine to headwaters. Miners sunk a few deep prospect holes in the White Pine, too, but an abundance of water prevented any of them reaching bedrock.

The emigrants, of course, joined the rush, men and women both, but with indifferent success. Gold may be "where you find it" but you generally find it distributed with regard to certain natural laws that the Californy men understood and the emigrants didn't. Of them all, only O'Donnell really "struck the color," and though his bench claim on Shauvegan had good values, the paystreak was wandering, huge boulders had to be moved to reach it, and aside from spring and early summer when a snow freshet from a side

gully was running, he had no water for his sluice. Gold mining is not always what it's cracked up to be.

Putting his clothes on, the Parson said, "You better come yonder with me. There's a woman got a desire to see you."

"The Widda Cobb? I don't know, Parson. I don't know about that. She tried to rope and hogtie me. She got matrimony on her mind."

But John was a trifle chary of sending him alone with the government grant —they knew it was addressed to the Parson and they might be waiting. No one was, though, and they left camp without incident, crossed some little, barren hills, and dropped down on the grass-deep bottoms of the White Pine.

The valley, aside from its mosquitoes, was about all a homemaker could wish for. There was pasture to a cow's belly, water in abundance for irrigation, and high ground for oats, spuds and corn. There were even buildings ready-made —the old stockade, sheds, blockhouses and trade house of the fur company built twenty years before and abandoned after the collapse of the fur market.

John said, "They should turn a fancy dollar on their crop what with gold flowing like water and spuds selling at two bits a pound."

"That's what I'm skeered of," said the Parson. "Too much money's worse'n not enough. A heap worse."

"That all depends on the indy-vigil," said John judiciously. "Now me, when I cut the big paystreak, I'll be mighty wise. Git me a Blackfeet gal, I will. Build me a snug shanty for winter and a tepee for summer. Oh, o' course, I'll buy me some fancy trappings, and a red dress for my squaw, but the rest of my money I'll salt away. Invest it in something that'll pay a steady interest like good, safe Confederate bonds."

They rode through the gate of the stockade and up to the old trade house where the Parson stuck his head in the door and called, "Stocker, wake up! I'm the Parson and I got something for ye!"

Stocker, a huge man built on the lines of a bull buffalo, came in carrying a candle in one hand, pulling his plowline suspenders over his shoulders, looking ill-tempered and bleary. He saw John and asked, "You on the jump again? By grannies, we're not having trouble with the law here and we don't figure to have."

"After I saved your hides and your outfits back on the pass," said John, "thanks for the welcome."

"Well, I ain't ungrateful. Only a body has to think of such things."

"If you're worried about the law, I'll tell ye something. *Legally* I'm not here at all. Legally, I'm in I-de-ho, and I got me a affy-david of the death certificate to prove it."

Stocker took the grant and looked at it. Other men came in—Lafe Crocker, Dilworth, Shallerbach, and sneaking around in the rear was weasel-faced Wally Snite.

"You don't need to hide thar, Snite," John said. "Come along in, I already kilt my man for the day."

John could not endure the sight of the sodbusters and left to visit the Widow Cobb who had her cap perched to marry him, a risk John was willing to run in order to fill himself with her corn meal fritters, cob syrup and home-made butter, the finest in all the West. He left her doing dishes and sneaked away to saddle his horse.

The Parson, finding him, said, "You can't leave already. We just—"

"I can and I am. That widda woman is enamored o' me, and I doubt I'd fit in double harness. Probably be a plow on the other end of it. No, I'm an old lone wolf, Parson. I'm a ring-tailed ripper from the Rawhide Mountains, like the poet said. I sleep with my boots on and I still got cockleburs in my hair I picked up in Coloraydo, I have for a fact, and all that don't make me the marrying kind."

Chapter Four

Shootin' Acquaintances

HE SLEPT IN THE OPEN, a cushion of spruce boughs under him, his saddleblanket over his shoulders, awakening at hour intervals to shiver away the mountain cold. In the morning he shot a blue grouse and roasted it on a prop stick, eating half and saving the other half for dinner. That night he was at French Pete's ranch on the Redwillow where he had left his gunpowder roan pony at pasture the winter before.

The pony was wild and hard to catch, sleek from the rich grass that grew in the bottoms, but he grew tractable once he had John's familiar weight on his back, and John's familiar voice in his ear. Mounted on the gunpowder and leading the bay, he rode to Silversides, a five-shanty mining camp to the north of the Hell Gate freight road. There, giving an ear to rumors of a rich showing on Hellroaring Creek, he turned farther north, entering a trackless wilderness of mountain and forest, living for three days on the trout he slapped from stream riffles grizzly fashion, at last coming on Hellroaring where eight bearded men were shacked up in two side-gulch dugouts, pitting the flanks of the watercourse with prospect holes.

John staked gravel and worked almost an entire day, but his claim did not show the color. He commenced working his way upstream, panning the benches and side gullies, his eye out for rusty quartz outcroppings that might indicate the mother lode.

He gave up and crossed to the east, working his way toward the diggings at Montana City, but great ridges of mountains lay between, and after days of toil up one canyon after another he found no landmark near or distant that was familiar.

He saw smoke and headed toward it. He found a village of Flathead Indians. He rested for a day, filled himself with venison and camas stew, got directions, and rode to the camp of Irish Bar, a mile off Blackfoot River.

He bucked a faro game. Loser, he sold his extra horse and part of his outfit, and he lost that. He had been cold-decked. He brooded about it. Late at night, the place almost empty, candles burning low, the dealer off at the bar for a whisky, John got up from the chair where he pretended to be asleep, drew his Navies and requested assistance of the lookout and case keeper in carrying the bank box of gold outside.

He did it so quietly that none of the half dozen others in the place even glanced around.

Outside, dawn was glowing through the spruce trees, but it was quite dark in the rubbish-littered area behind the saloon.

"Don't try anything, boys," John said, "because I got eyes like a lynx brought up in a coal mine, and if I had to shoot one of ye, t'other would be saddled with the task of carrying this treasure by his lonesome and that ain't my idee of equity."

He rode south, following no trail. It

was fine to be a man of wealth again, and fine to feel the solid satisfaction of a deed well done. He rested at a prospector's shanty and rode on, leaving the mountains, crossing sage-covered hills to Montana City.

The camp was scattered for miles, a cluster of houses here and a cluster there separated by acres of washed gravel that turned white in the sun. He sat in the shadowy depths of the camp's largest saloon and gave ear to the talk around him, but the news of his Irish Bar robbery had not preceded him. Montana City cared not one damn for anything except Montana City gold, and that was how it should be, each camp minding its own business and not out with ropes meddling in somebody else's road agents. He had a bath. He had a haircut and beard trim at a lady barber's. He emerged brushed and perfumed. He bought a new shirt, a white linen one. He drank fancy wine. He did the polka with a beautiful, broad brunette in the Golden Slipper dance hall. There was a four-room hotel where he put up at $12 a night, but the softness of the bed troubled him so he arose and slept rolled in a blanket, by the creek. Next morning, emerging from a restaurant with a toothpick in his teeth and his stomach filled with side meat, Mormon eggs and chopped fried potatoes, he heard the thum-tumming of a banjo and a familiar voice raised defiantly in song:

"*Co-man-che John rode to Singleshot*
With a pal named Jimmy Dale,
And just for some excitement
They robbed the northern mail;
Now Jimmy's six foot underground
And much he rues the day,
Whilst Comanche rides the long cou-lee
Tryin' to git away."

John whacked the legs of his homespuns and said, "Why, damme, it's White Eyes!"

White Eyes was roosted on a barrel beneath the pole awning of the stage station, a tall man turning gray, looking out with milky, sightless eyes.

He stopped singing and reached out with the banjo in the hope someone would drop gold in it, but no one was close.

"Hold it," said John slouching up, and dropped in a two ounce nugget. "Thar, how ye like *that* metal?"

Sound of John's voice made White Eyes move as though his barrel had caught fire. "Yipee," he said restraining his voice. "It's the old Comanche himself! They said ye wouldn't dare stay in Montana once they got the print shop posters up, but I said, 'You wait and you see, the Comanche will come and he'll go and he'll leave dead Yankees and robbed coaches behint him each turn of the way!' "

"I settled down a mite, White Eyes. Me for the quiet life. I staked me some gulch gravel on Hellroaring, worked it with my own hands, toiled from sunup to sundown, and now I got me a considerable weight of metal, only I didn't exactly git it thar."

"*You* settle down? I'll never see that day. Nor you, neither." Then he whispered, "I got a message for ye."

"For me? How'd they know I'd come to Montana City when I didn't know it myself?"

"Reckon they knew you'd always find your old friend, White Eyes. We drawn to each other, John. We—"

"Message from who?"

"That sky pilot. Parson back in New Boston. He says for ye to come back. I don't know what he means by it, but he says they haven't heered the last of

that robbery at Moosehorn. Did ye rob a coach at Moosehorn Pass, John? Did ye? It'd made a fine verse for your song—"

"Waal, no I didn't, but I robbed the boys that robbed the coach at Moosehorn, how'd that be?"

He saddled and rode, and again it was night, and again he spoke to the Parson through the back door of his mission.

"Thank heaven ye come," said the Parson. "I need ye, John. Need ye bad."

"Those damn farmers, ain't it? By grab, don't you ever mix me up with a bunch of punkinrollers again. How you ever expect me to make my fortune so I can ree-tire and take life easy like I deserve? What they done now? I suppose they lost that Gov'ment grant. Got it stole from 'em."

"It's gone," moaned the Parson deep in misery. "Not stole, thank the Lord for that. Burned up in a fire. But *they* don't know it's burned up, so—"

"Who don't?"

"Those claim jumpers—Huckven, Overfelt, Hoss Noon. Do you know what they did, John? Come in by the dark of night and put up their claim markers all over the best parts of White Pine. Well, Stocker and the boys run 'em off, and now they have the law working. That drunken Judge Harrison—his variety of law."

"This happened *before* ye lost the grant?"

"After. Oh, if we *had* it, it'd be different. The law'd be on our side then. Of course, we were there *first*. Even Judge—"

"But what if *they* show up with the grant? What then?"

"It was burned."

"Maybe it was," John muttered. "But then maybe, just *maybe*."

"John, I don't know what to do. I'm gittin' near the end of my days. I can feel the cold of the grave settling in my bones. I'm weary and bowed with care."

"You're tough as bull jerky," said John with no sympathy.

"No, I ain't, the twilight of my days are here, and I got only one last wish—to see those farmers snug and safe in their homes, to see the broad valley of the White Pine green and yaller with their crops. I saved your neck from the hangrope, John. I saved it for a purpose, because I figured there was more good in ye than evil, and this is your chance to prove I was right. This'll prove I was right and those vigilantes was wrong. So save it for me, John. Save the White Pine!"

"I'll do it!" said John. "I'll save these punkinrollers their homes and farms if I have to beat their heads with my Navy guns and marry Sister Cobb, I'll *do* it!"

Comanche John slept with the Parson, and come morning he mosied out on the street. No one recognized him; he saw himself on no reward posters. He sat in plain sight in a willow-weave chair on the porch of the new Territorial Hotel, he chewed and spit across the plank walk, and watched a steady press of men and freight outfits along the street without seeing a single person he ever remembered seeing before. The big rush now was up the Missouri by steamboat to Fort Benton, and down on the new freight road through Last Chance and Montana City, and while only a twelvemonth ago the Californy men were in a majority, now they were mostly busted farmers, army deserters and draft dodgers, the untanned, untried flotsam of the East.

Leaving town with the Parson he

said, "If I ever seen a conclave of abolitionists this camp of New Boston is it. I low, if I cut loose with my Navies I'd empty this camp in five minutes."

"There's *some* you wouldn't empty the town of, and I mean Clip Overfelt, and Hoss Noon, and Missou, and Huckven and Billy Step-and-a-Half. They were run out of Californy, and run out of Snake River, and run off from Bannack—"

"And now they're staking your farm land!"

"The very ones!"

Hoss, John was thinking. He remembered someone being called "Hoss" that night of the holdup. And he seemed to recall one being called Step-and-a-Half, too.

He said, "How about a tall, limber one with sort of a loose long jaw and a yaller moustache like so?"

"That's Huckven. Government wants him for murdering Injuns down on the Piute preserve, or so it's told. You acquainted with him?"

"I had a *shootin'* acquaintance. I had a shootin' acquaintance with *all* of 'em, but it war dark, I doubt I'll be known."

It didn't seem reasonable, them staking the bottoms. Any gold there would be deep under thirty or forty feet of overburden, and mining that would be *work*, and work never appealed to men of their stamp. He said as much, and the Parson answered.

"They can't mine the White Pine by drifting or any other way. Too much water. Sink a hole anywhere, have a well in thirty feet. And it's too flat to hydraulic. That's what puzzles me. Why stake the bottoms when there's no chance of mining it?"

"They could scoop and skid with a drag bucket and one of those high washers like I seen in Californy. They're the latest wrinkle, Parson. Backfill the tails into the excavation and use the same water over and over. But who'd know about *that* fancy system in this camp? Not that dirty Huckven. I'll wager they got a man behind 'em with brains. By grab, Parson, it *is* lucky ye sent for me!"

Lafe Crocker sat in a rocking chair outside the stockade with a Yager rifle beside him keeping watch.

Crocker said no, there had been no trouble, not a sign of trouble.

"We figure they'll try it the legal way first," he said. "They delivered a paper just yesterday signed by Judge Harrison."

The Parson led John to the remains of a burned blockhouse. "It was hid there. Hid in a can between the logs on the second floor. Couldn't help but be burned."

John raked the ashes and found the can crushed flat by fallen timbers which later burned. He got the can open. There was no parchment, of course. Heat would have consumed it. But there should have been ashes, and at least some remnants of the heavy gold seal that had been affixed to it, and the can was empty of anything.

"It was stole," John said. "Then the man that stole it set the fire so your boys wouldn't know it was stole. All of a sudden they'll get ye into court and flash it on ye, and that grant wasn't made over to anybody. Whoever owns the grant owns the land. So keep 'em off. Fight 'em off. Meantime, I got an idee to git it back."

"What you aim to do?"

"Jine 'em. Yep, Parson, come tomorrow Huckven, Overfelt and Hoss Noon will have a new associate."

Chapter Five

A Californy Man

COMANCHE JOHN sat with his chair tilted against the rear wall of the saloon, his black slouch hat over his eyes, moving only when he aimed tobacco juice at the sawdust box which served as a spittoon. It was late afternoon, still light outside, but here in the low, long, almost windowless saloon building half a dozen lamps were on. A faro game moved listlessly. Four miners and a down-at-the-heel gambler in greenish serge and a Louisiana planter's hat played poker. At the bar several men were drinking, and one of them was whooping and beating the bar with his fist in the delight of telling his exploits among the squaws of the Palouse tribe over in Walla Walla country. That noisy one was Missou, one of the gang who had been in on the robbery at Moosehide.

Now two other members of the gang came in. One John recognized as Clip Overfelt, the leader, and the other was Billy Step-and-a-Half, a rusty complexioned man of twenty-six or twenty-seven limping on a foot half shot away years before by a shotgun blast.

Missou quieted a little and tried to look sober at their entrance, and John, yawning and stretching, got up and slouched to the bar.

"Whisky!" he said, but the bartender was too busy with his newly entered customers to hear him. John struck the bar with the heel of his palm and roared, "Whisky, do ye hear or would you rather I parted your hair with a .36 caliber comb?"

The bartender stopped and looked at him without favor. He set a glass out and knocked it sliding down the bar with the back of his hand. He hooked a jug of trade whisky from under the bar and there John stopped him.

"Not that!" He pointed at a fancy decanter bottle of Old Haversill Bourbon that occupied the place of glory on the backbar, a showpiece, intended not for drinking but for style. "*That!*"

The bartender couldn't believe his ears.

"That?" he asked, pointing to a half-gone bottle of cheaper whisky.

"No," said John. He moved a step toward the middle of the room; his right shoulder dipped, and there was a backward slouch of his body, a Navy exploded with a finger of powderflame over the edge of the bar and the fancy bottle of Old Haversill stood neckless with bits of glass and cork zinging the air. "That!"

The explosion had stopped every other sound in the room. As everyone stared, Comanche John chawed, and spat, and reholstered his Navy.

"Gittin' so's a Californy man can't make himself understood speakin' the English lang'age. Country full up with abolitionists, draft dodgers and Illini farm boys. Don't understand the *English* lang'age. Got to talk to 'em in *Colt* lang'age."

With awed deference the bartender set down the decapitated bottle of Old Haversill and John poured from its shattered neck. "Messy job," he complained. "Putting no glass in the bottles these days. Cheapness showing up everywhar. Time was ye could nick off a bottle clean as an undertaker's chin."

"Say!" cried Missou after holding his breath a long ten seconds. "That was *shootin'!*"

"Oh, I keep my eye sharp. Waren't much, though, compared to the man that taught me."

"Who in thunderation *taught* you?"

"Nobody but the *one and gen-u-wine* Jimmy Dale!"

"Jimmy Dale, from Californy? Why I *seen* him one time. It was in Placerville, the vigilantes was after him, they was combing the country after him, and one night in he comes, straight into camp, all alone, riding a big bay horse, and he climbed off in front of everybody, and walked inside the Star West Saloon. Had a brace of pearl handled Navies on his hips, and one of them German needle-fire repeating rifles under his arm, and not a cowardly son of 'em raised a finger."

John lowered his voice looking around. "Yep, I believe it. I seen Jimmy a heap of times. I seen something no other man has seen. I seen him *dead*. I did. And I buried him, rolled up in his quilts, his hat over his face, and an ounce of bushwhackin' vigilante lead in his back. We rode down the deep gulch together, Jimmy and me. We took things as they come, the gold and the lead both. Share and share alike, that was our motto."

Missou almost swallowed his tobacco from amazement. "Say! What you trying to tell us? You must be—"

"Who I be and who I *might* be are subjects that's been discussed by some live men and lots of dead ones."

Overfelt had been trying to remember and now he snapped his fingers in a sign of recognition. "Sure, now I know where I saw you before—Vermont Bar, year of '58. You're Comanche John!"

Under his breath, tapping a boot heel, Missou sang:

"John started out for Singleshot
With a pal named Jimmy Dale
And just for some excitement
They robbed the Union mail—"

"Never you mind that," said John. "Folks hereabouts have got me buried over in I-de-ho, and I'm just as happy in my grave." Then he added, "Mite gant, though. Could do with a weight of gold on me. I heered of you boys, that's why I come. Figured we might just maybe—"

"I don't know," said Overfelt. "Sometimes a man carves out too much reputation for himself."

"Trying to be considerate," John said. "Trying to play square. Don't like to move in with a gang of my own and upset the good thing ye have. Rather jine ye. You're men of my style and cut of my cloth. Gold enough for all. Gold flowing like she is from Chiny Gulch, no good reason why we shouldn't be able to git rich and ree-tire to live the good life like country squires, and even run for Congress, when the war's over and this Territory takes her place amongst the glorious States of the Confed'racy!"

"Hoorah for Jeff Davis!" said Missou. "That's talk I like to hear."

He drank with Missou and Billy Step-and-a-Half. He drank less than he appeared to; when they became drunk enough he drank none at all. Others joined them. In a back room they played poker. Missou went to sleep and snored. He fell out of his chair and lay on the floor, still snoring. Big, rough Hoss Noon cursed him and kicked him in the ribs without succeeding in awakening him. Then he drew a Navy, and cocked it, and aimed it at his head. Nobody said anything, but with a shrug of regret he put the Navy back. "Should kill him. Man can't hold his likker. Bound to give you away sometime. Should never have took him in."

A man called Little Frenchy smiled with rabbit teeth and said, "He's here firs', don' you remembaire?"

"Well, you listen to me, he'll go waltzing into the Montana House once too often sometime, and—" He finished the thought by pointing a forefinger at his temple like a gun, and using his thumb to simulate the falling hammer. "He'll disobey the *big* boss once too often sometime and that'll be all for Missou."

"What's wrong with the Montana House?" John asked. "If ye ask me that's a fancy establishment."

"Fancy's no word for it, only we stay out."

"Why?"

Hoss Noon let out a loud, braying laugh. "Listen to *him*. He wants to know why we don't go in the Montana House. That's a question that's been troubling some of the other boys, too. Well, the answer is, we *do* go in, but only for a drink, and then we get out. Point is we don't hang around there. Why? Because it's *orders*. The sheriff ain't after us and we're all living mighty high, staying out of the Montana House and taking orders. Curiosity," Hoss added with the manner of one inventing a new and apt remark, "kilt the cat!"

"Then," said John, "I'll not be the one to go agin' established principle. Good enough for you, it's good enough for me. Share and share alike, that's my motto."

Chapter Six

Female Amusement

HE SLEPT IN A SHANTY with Hoss Noon, Frenchy and Huckven. It was dark when he got there, and he had an uncomfortable moment in the morning when Huckven sat up and had a first bleary look at him, but he did not recognize John as the man who had covered him with a Navy that night up the gulch.

"They tell me you claim to be Comanche John," Huckven said, parting his stringy red moustaches off to one side and the other. "Well, I *knew* Comanche John, shacked up with him in Utah, and robbed coaches with him in the Sierras, and you don't look *nothing* like him. Besides the Comanche's dead, shot by a sheriff's posse in Oregon Gulch down in Coloraydo."

"That's peculiar," said John. "I got right hyar in my pocket a certificate saying I was hung in I-de-ho City. And I was hung in Yallerjack, too. How many graveyards I got fighting over me, anyhow?"

"That'n they hung in I-de-ho City was an imposter. Some men'll do anything to get folks to admire 'em. Even git hung. So I ain't admiring *you*, or giving you an inch of ground just because you *claim* to be Comanche John."

He had no more trouble with Huckven. He had no trouble with any of them. They were an indolent, drunken lot, but fair company. Then one morning, with dawn just on its way and the camp quiet, Overfelt awakened them with word that a task awaited them in the direction of Last Chance.

They rode all day, slept in an abandoned wickiup near Green Canyon, and waited most of the next day by a rough side road about twelve miles to the west of Last Chance Gulch. All John knew was that the road led back into the mountains to Reddow, a hardrock camp where several outcroppings of "rotten quartz" were being worked by means of hand mortars, amalgamating pans and vanners, the amalgamating pans catching most of the gold and horn silver through its willingness to join with mercury which later was distilled

leaving a silver-gold sponge, the vanners making a rich lead-silver concentrate of the rest, and this was sacked and hauled by wagon to Fort Benton 200 miles to the north, then by river steamboat to St. Louis, and then by rail to the Eastern seaboard where sailing ships transported it to the smelters of Saxony or Wales.

After waiting until late in the afternoon a freight outfit consisting of three wagons and a long, jerkline string of mules came into sight. There were two teamsters and two men riding guard, but not a shot was fired. Masked, with guns drawn, Comanche John and most of the others waited at a distance of forty or fifty yards while Overfelt, Hoss Noon and a young fellow called Oregon rode in leading a packhorse, explaining their mission.

The freight boss laughed bitterly and said they'd play hell hauling off much of the concentrate, and play further hell selling it when they did, but Overfelt ordered the wagons unloaded and unearthed the thing he was looking for, a cache of gold and silver sponge.

"He was damned well informed!" said John.

"You stick with us," said Missou. "We're *always* well informed."

Two days later, in New Boston, John got as his split a poke of gold, regular Chiny Gulch dust, the sponge having been disposed of he knew not how.

Again there was nothing to do but take his ease in one saloon or another. He dropped a few hints concerning the claims that had been staked on White Pine bottoms and learned nothing. They had been staked, like the robbery had been performed, on orders. He tried to learn the identity of the big boss, and failed. The Montana House, however, was forbidden ground. The gang was not to be seen loitering there. So one evening, there he was, in the Montana, a theater, bar, and gambling house, probably the largest in the territory.

He played faro and won a little, and three card monte and lost a little. In the theater, an orchestra consisting of a cornet, a violin and a harp commenced to play. The theater offered standing room and some boxes with painted screen fronts where the new-rich tycoons of Chiny Gulch and the Shauvegan could drink champagne with their women friends and see without being seen.

After half an hour of orchestra music, some curtains parted revealing a tiny, gilt-arched stage and the show commenced. It was a rowdy show presenting the same performers over and over in songs, dances and comic dialogues.

Then with a flourish, a man in tight checkered trousers, a corset-fitting coat, a cane, and a high, mouse-colored silk hat advanced to the middle of the stage and announced in clear, tenor tones the feature attraction of the evening, direct from St. Louis, Noo Yawk, and Paris, France, the Songbird of the Seine, Mademoiselle Louise Deveroux, "La Belle Gants de Soie."

Mademoiselle Deveroux proved to be on the large side, but well-curved buxom, brunette, and beautiful. She wore a white gown covered with spangles, and lace gloves to her elbows. In midstage she waited until the crowd quieted, then posturing, clasping her hands, with a French accent forgotten after first measure, she sang:

"*Thees handful of earth do we send you,*

Thees handful of earth did we save,
Wet with our teardrops a-mourning,
This earth from your dear Molly's grave. . . ."

Men wept, and when she had finished they fairly tore the place down in their enthusiasm. She returned to mid-stage and was showered by gold pieces and nuggets. A Negro man scurried around gathering the gold into a cigar box as she returned for repeated encores. "More, more!" cried the audience with fresh showers of gold. She waited until the last available nugget had been tossed, then a painted flat representing a log cabin with an improbable waterfall was carried on stage, and she returned gowned in velvet and sang, "The Cabin Where the Old Folks Died." Again she was applauded with more gold, but men familiar with her act from other nights started shouting, "Natchez Song! Natchez Song!"

To this she responded by pulling her gown over her head and amid the roar of the audience she walked around shaking her hips, slapping her hindquarters, garbed in nothing except cream-colored tights.

"Whoopee!" shouted John with the rest, "Hoorah for La Belle Gants de Soie!"

She now cut loose with a rowdy song popular in the river towns of the lower Mississippi:

"*What kind o' drawers do the white girls wear?*
What kind o' drawers do the rich *girls wear?*
Pink and lace worth two dollar pair,
That's what, honey, mine!

"*What kind o' drawers do the yaller gals wear?*
What kind o' drawers do the brown gals wear?
None at all, they just go bare,
That's what, honey, mine!"

Comanche John had squeezed through the crowd until he could almost hang his nose over the stage. He was so close he could smell the perfume she wore. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and the best scented. But even as he gained his place of vantage he was caught in a wash of the shoving crowd and carried away to be pinned against the wall. At his back was one of the private boxes. Its sliding front was partially open; he saw it was unoccupied. He climbed inside. It contained a spindle-legged gilt table and four spindly gilt chairs. He sat down in one of the chairs, tilted back in it, put his jack-boots on the table, spurted tobacco juice on the floor and watched in style. Then, of a sudden, he noticed that La Belle Gants de Soie was staring at *him.*

He arose, swept off his battered slouch hat, thrust one jackboot far out, bent the other knee, and bowed. She smiled, reached far out with her silken-gloved hand, and blew a kiss to him.

"Champagne!" roared John, beating the table with his fist.

A Chinese boy must have been awaiting just those words for scarcely had he uttered them when the door at his back popped open and there he was with the bottle and two glasses.

"You would like female amusement?" asked the Chinese.

"Just leave that bottle, I'm *gittin'* female amusement."

Comanche John opened the bottle by knocking its neck off with his Navy. The Champagne was warm and wild. He drank the top two inches to save it.

It got all bubbly up his nose. He was sneezing it when the door opened again and this time a short, extremely powerful, gorilla-built man looked in on him.

"By grab," said John, "I would welcome a visitor, but not you."

"Get out," said the man. He had a peculiar accent. "Go, leave."

John arose, "You telling *me* to git?"

"Boss said go, leave."

"*What* boss?"

"Malloy!"

Walker Malloy, that would be. Walker Malloy, owner of the Montana House, part owner of the K-Y freight outfit, share owner in half a dozen placer mines, representative in the Territorial Legislature which just recently had met in Bannack City.

"Malloy, hey?" said John. He was crafty now, for this was what he had come to learn. "Ain't I good enough for him? Ain't shaved, ain't pomaded my whiskers?"

"Get out!" said the short man letting his hand fall to the butt of the double derringer thrust in the sash at his waist.

The threat proved a mistake. He had no chance to draw the gun. John's right hand Navy was out. "Dance, dang ye!" he whooped. "Jig high, kick your heels!" He fired. The bullet split one side of the man's boot. It stung his foot and sent him hopping and grimacing holding the foot in his hand. John whooped, fired again, tearing half the sole from the other boot as he came down. "I'll show ye who gits! Maybe you're for Malloy, but I'm for me, and do you know who I be? I'm a ringtailed ripper from the Rawhide Mountains. I'm a mangy old he-wolf from Orofino Gulch. In summer I range with the mountain lions and when winter comes I den up with the grizzly b'ars. Some folks ask what I stand for and what are my principles. Waal, I'm for sidemeat and corn likker, I'm for slavery in the territories and Jeff Davies for President!"

The man fled, limping on his bullet-shredded boots. The air was blue and raw from powdersmoke. No one paid more than passing heed to the pistol shots as they cheered La Belle Gants de Soie, and now she was singing again. John had a drink of the fancy wine and sat down to listen. He caught sight of the man again, limping around the far side of the room, stopping at a booth where a lean, tall, very handsome man was seated, one polished Spanish boot notched on the edge of the table, hands clasped across his silver and tan fancy vest, a long, slim cigar scissored in his teeth.

"Why, I'd reckon that's him!" said John. "Mr. Walker Malloy himself. Representative in the Territorial Legislature. Got his hand in everything, in law, in mining, and in robbery, too. Even itching for the White Pine Valley! Poor damn farmers, willing to run 'em out of their homes."

La Belle concluded. The stage was taken over by a buck and wing in blackface. Malloy got to his feet and went out. John waited, packboots on the table, black slouch hat over his eyes, chaw of tobacco in one cheek, the champagne at his right hand. There was a rap, and when he said, "Come in," it was not Walker Malloy as he expected, but La Belle Gants de Soie! He got his boots down and almost swallowed his tobacco. "La Belle—"

"Hush!" she whispered with her finger to her lips. "Don' let heem hear you. Don' let heem know I am here!"

"Let who know?" asked John.

"That man!" She wrung her hands.

"Oh, how I fear heem! That man—Walker Malloy."

"By grab, you don't need to be skeered of Malloy or anybody else as long as I'm around."

"Oh, John!" she said, weeping with her cheek pressed against his chest. "John, you will help me!"

"How do you know my name is John?"

"But you are famous! You are the great Comanche John!"

John, supporting her, asked, "How many more folks knows I'm Comanche John?"

"But no one! Only me. In California I saw your picture. Then when I saw you!"

By grab, John was thinking, I am famous and women *do* have a way of taking to me! There was that Blackfeet gal a year ago, and the Widow Cobb, and now La Belle Gants de Soie herself.

He said, "So ye be well acquainted with Walker Malloy!"

"He got me here. He promised a lot of *theengs.*" Every so often she would sound very French. "All the way from New Orleans he breeng me! He promise I would *seeng* in *ze* opera. And look, this place, *thees* cheap variety theater!"

"Thar, thar now! Don't you cry about it because I'm here to help ye!"

"You will? What will you do?"

"Waal, thar's several courses of action, but we better plan things out. He's a mighty important man, Malloy. Representative in that damn Yankee legislature down in Bannack, gold claims, fancy clothes, important friends. Yep, we got to go easy. Larn a few things about him, whar he lives, whar he keeps his valuables, all that sort of truck."

"I will do anything!" she whispered. "*Any-zeeng!*"

Chapter Seven

"*Secret Mission*"

COMANCHE JOHN drank champagne with La Belle Gants de Soie. After she left he had a fling at faro. He wandered all over the lower floor of the big building getting the lay of the ground. Some stairs led above and he would have climbed those, but seated on guard, a sawed-off shotgun at hand, was the short, hunched, powerful man whom he had caused to dance in the theater. He had new boots on, John noticed, but judging by his mean expression he still did not feel good about it. Type who harbored a grudge, probably. *Max the Ape*, Belle had called him. It was a good name, it fit him, he looked like an ape with his slanty forehead and his thrust-out mouth and chin, and those arms, away too long and strong for a man of his height.

John stood by the monte game and looked around. At the head of the stairs and to the left was a small balcony, and there, watching *him*, was Walker Malloy.

His hangout was there, on the upper floor. His *apartment* Belle had called it. John itched to visit his apartment and have a talk with him, and thought over all sorts of excuses to get there, and what he would say after he *did* get there. But Max the Ape would be hard to convince. He decided to see the Parson.

It was now almost midnight. "Ho-ho-hum!" yawned John. "Reckon this be a quiet night. Might as well hit the shucks."

He left. He had an idea he was being followed. He went to the shack. Missou, Huckven, none of the men were there. He went straight on and crawled through

the rear window. He hunted a shadowy route to the Mission. "Parson!" he said into the darkness. The Parson was not there. He got his horse from the feed corral and rode toward White Pine. He did not get there. A man was riding from the region of the old fur post, skulking along, following some brush shadow, and John, hunting shadow of his own, waited for him. The man proved to be Wally Snite.

He gave Wally Snite a quarter mile and followed. He lost sight of him among the outlying shanties of New Boston. Acting on a hunch he rode at a gallop along one of the gulch-side streets, dismounted, and took a path to the rear door of the Montana House. He stopped, hunkered in the shadows, got his breath.

Scarcely half a minute passed and there was Wally Snite, on foot, sneaking into view, pausing to look all around, and then climbing some rear stairs to the second floor of the Montana.

"Yellabelly! Yankee!" Snite *wasn't* a Yankee, he had the talk of a Missouri man, but John always considered him a Yankee by *inclination*. "Told 'em not to trust him! Wouldn't listen to me. But it's *me* got to git their land grant back!"

He considered following Snite up the stairs. He didn't. He walked all around the building looking at the upper floor windows. They told him nothing. He had a look at the crowd inside thinking that Snite, an avowed temperance man, might just be sneaking off for a round with the bottle. He was not there. All this took time; perhaps half an hour had passed. He went back to the rear. Just as he arrived, the door at the top of the stairs opened and men were moving around. He retreated and hunkered in the shadows to watch. One of those men was Max the Ape, and there were two more. They were struggling with something. Tall man, that was Huckven. They were carrying the limp body of a man.

He followed them, keeping a safe distance. He decided they were headed for a certain place around some outbuildings and circled to intercept them. He waited several minutes. No sound. He had been wrong. He had lost them. He blamed himself for not keeping at their heels. He had a good hunch who the dead man was, but he had wanted to be sure. He poked back through the outbuildings and almost stumbled over his body. It was Wally Snite and he had been shot in the back.

"O' course!" said John. "Used him for what he was worth, stole the paper for 'em, probably thought they'd make him rich. Instead, all he collected was a half-ounce of lead. That's how it is drawing cyards in another man's game."

John left him there. He went to the shanty. Missou was drunk and asleep. John could not stand the sound and smell of him, so he carried his robes to the open and slept there. He awoke ill-tempered. It was that fancy wine of the night before. He felt better after dipping his head in the creek, and better yet after breakfast and a chaw. The Parson was still not at the Mission, but starting again for White Pine he met the old man on his mule about a mile from camp.

"Whar's Wally Snite?" were John's first words.

The Parson jerked and said, "His woman's been wondering—"

"Waal, you go congratulate her because she's a widow."

"Ye didn't—"

"O' course I didn't. His *friends* did it. Walker Malloy, and that one they call Max the Ape."

"What are you talking about?"

"Just that. He stole it for 'em. The grant. Stole it and burned the place down, I'd reckon, so it wouldn't be missed. Went to visit 'em last night. To *collect* maybe—well, he *collected.* Lead in the back. So Malloy's got your deed. But I promised ye I'd git it back, and I'll *git* it back."

"How can you get it back?" moaned the Parson. "You'll never get it back. We'll have to fight 'em, that's all."

"Mayhap ye will, but it'll be better to fight with the legal title than without it."

"How could you get it back? You'll get shot."

"No-o, I won't. I got idees, Parson, and I got cleverness. When you're up again' a smart man like Malloy, only thing to be is smarter than he is."

"John, you're fast with a Navy, and you're true-blue, but smartness ain't one o' your qualities."

"Next thing ye'll say is women don't like me neither. What'd ye say if I told ye that last night I was picked and chose by La Belle Gants de Soie?"

"I'd say beware of that woman. She's Malloy's woman and she'll lead ye to disaster."

John rode off muttering. "Blamed old rooster! Jealous of me. Saying things about Belle! I'll show *him* whether that woman's enamored o' me!"

The warning, however, continued to bother him and that night when he managed a meeting with Belle he said, "I might as well tell ye, gal, I'm here on a *secret mission.* Yep, I be, and I intend to listen to none of your talk about one of the finest men in the territory, and I mean Walker Malloy!"

When she was gone John said, "That's the ticket! Let her carry that to him. When ye go after a man like Malloy, got to be smart, got to be wary."

He watched for Malloy. An hour passed. The Ape guarded the stairs. He slouched up, and using his body to hide his action from the rest of the room he drew a Navy and said, "Climb!"

The Ape had been watching him, but the sudden appearance of the gun was a surprise. He sprang to his feet with his short, spraddle legs working like released springs; he opened his mouth and closed it like a fish. He had the double-gun but he did not point it; he put it down, without a word turned and climbed the stairs.

"That's the ticket," said John, close behind. "Don't look back. Don't argue. Just climb. Malloy's yonder, in his rooms, and that's whar you're taking me."

They reached the top of the stairs and walked straight on through a hall lighted by candles in bracket lamps. The Ape stopped at a closed door.

"Don't rap," said John. "Don't say a word. Ye might have a signal worked out and it'd only git ye kilt. Just open."

The Ape swung the door open revealing Walker Malloy seated behind a table, writing in a ledger.

"What the devil!" said Malloy starting to his feet. He saw Comanche John and the leveled Navy. He froze with a hand resting on the pearl-handled gun at his waist, his face stony, his eyes as narrow and hard as twin pieces of quartz.

"Visitor," said John nudging the Ape aside and going in past him. He caught the door with his bootheel and kicked it shut in the Ape's face. He leaned against the door and bolted it. He thrust the Navy back in its holster. He chawed

and looked around the room which was furnished as no room he had seen this side of Salt Lake.

"Say, this is something! This *is* something. This is quality. By grab, this is *style!*"

Malloy decided to smile. He did it in the brittle, correct way he did everything. "Thank you!"

"Yep, *style!*" He kept looking around the room. There were some shelves stacked with papers, the grant might be there, and there was a black metal strongbox on the desk, it might be there. There was another room to the left, an archway covered by a velvet drape. No window in the room—but, straight overhead was a skylight. A man could lower himself from that skylight and nigh put his feet on the table.

"What do you want?" asked Malloy with an edgy voice.

"Spittoon, wouldn't want to douse this carpet. Say, this is a carpet!" He located the spittoon, took very careful aim, and hit it. "Lots of folks wouldn't try a shot like that, but chawin' tobacco is like doing anything else, if it's worth doing at all it's worth doing right. I—"

Malloy made a quick turn and walked back to his chair. He sat down, sticking his boots far out. They were fine boots, the best Spanish, very long and narrow. He wore parsleymix trousers, the real English cloth, a white linen shirt, a black string tie. His hair was reddish and slightly gray at the temples, but he was not more than thirty-two or thirty-three years old. He had long, bloodless fingers and a nervous way of picking things up and laying them down.

"You have your guts," he said. "Walking in here like this! I admire guts!"

"Thank-ee."

"But that might not stop me killing you."

"Could ye?"

"I could. What do you want?"

"You're an important man, Malloy. Representative in legislature, mine owner, business man, head boss of the worst gang of varmints in the territory. Now, what would ye say if *I* said ye were wasting your talents, monkey-puddling around with small-bore stuff? What would ye say if I told ye I came here not to take a hand in robbery, but for *one* purpose, and that to find a man of talent to take over the whole o' Montana Territory for the gov'ment, to run it for 'em, to be paid a legal commission for running it so's he couldn't help but make himself the richest, powerfullest man in the whole Nor'west."

"The *government*?" Malloy was ready to laugh, but something about John's eyes stopped him.

"Not Lincoln's variety of Gov'ment. Not by a jugful. I mean the real, legal gov'ment as soon as the Territory of Montana, together with Oregon, I-de-ho and Washington jines with Jeff Davis and the Confed'racy."

Malloy was interested. He struck a patent match and waited for the chemical to stop showering sparks before applying it to his cigar. He puffed and watched while John fumbled deep in his homespuns and came out with a folder almost worn out from long carrying. Malloy took it, opened it and looked at it. Then he stopped John from saying any more and addressed the draped doorway.

"All right, Huck, you can come out."

John stopped chawing and watched as the draperies moved and Huckven ambled tall and loose-jointed into view with a gun in his hand.

"Put it up," said Malloy, and Huck-

ven did, reluctantly, his lips twisted down.

John said, jerking his head at Huckven, "He told ye thar was something wrong with me being here, didn't he? Warned ye. Well, Huck is no ordinary man. He ain't taken in like the rest. He knew Comanche John wasn't the type to jine with a gang of road agents and take orders. And I ain't. I'm here for a purpose. The great—"

"Never mind!" Malloy said softly through his teeth. He waited, drumming the table with his nervous fingers until Huckven was through the door and the door closed. "Keep it between us. What is your *secret mission*?"

He had not said "secret mission" to Malloy. He had said it to La Belle Gants de Soie. It jolted him, and it made him wince. "Dratted Parson!" he muttered. The Parson was always turning up right about people. He said, "Yep, as that paper says I'm with that secret, patriotic organization of the South, the Knights of the Golden Circle, I'm roving representative with the full power of the central conclave behind me. We be gittin' ready to move. Knights in Californy, Nevady, I-de-ho, Coloraydo, Oregon men all trained, guns ready, plan set. Army style."

Malloy, cool and smiling, said, "One morning they'll just wake up and there it will be?"

"Thar it'll be. We got a general heading it. Real general-Mexican war. Colonels, majors, everything."

"I have a surprise for you. I'm from the North."

"I know. As for you being *for* the North, I think not. You be *for* Walker Malloy."

Malloy did not argue with that. He said, "Why would you want *me* to take over the country?"

"Because you could make it produce. Right now the freight, trade and gold buying is all Yankee. Things have got to keep moving, but for *the South*. Got to git the gold to the Southern buyers. They need it desperate bad to keep buying guns in Europe. Gold will win the war. Have to keep the mines working. Have to make mining more profitable under the Confed'racy than under the Union, otherwise the miners will rise up and run us out. Agree?"

"Agree!"

"You're the man for us, Malloy. You'd keep it moving. You'd take over when we run these damnyankee gold buyers and flour merchants out. You take their profit. Only fair. Profit you earn. When the war is over they get their businesses back, but before then I wouldn't be amazed if *Mr. Walker Malloy* mightn't make himself one of the richest men in the whole Nor'west!"

Chapter Eight

What a Smart Man Can Do

NO LONGER did Comanche John bed down on the floor of the shack. He slept in the Montana, in a room with a bed. He had breakfast prepared by Walker Malloy's Chinese cook. He had credit at the bar. There was an afternoon show which he watched from the private luxury of a box. He received a visit from La Belle whom he pretended to take into his confidence, telling her exactly what he wanted carried on to Walker Malloy. He sat with his jackboots on the spindly little table, tilted back on the rear legs of an equally spindly chair. Things were fine for his comfort. Things were going topriffle. It showed what a man could do when he used his brain.

That night with Malloy downstairs

watching the games he found a firehole and climbed to the roof. The night was cool. The moon was under clouds, but he could see. The roof flat and slanting, covered with a layer of gravel to help shed the rain. It was broken by chimneys, ventilators, and the skylight above Malloy's office. He walked to the skylight.

The office was dark. The window had been lifted on a prop-pole. A slight current of warm air drifted up carrying the odors of perfume, liquor and Cuban cigar.

He was in no hurry. He crouched on one knee listening. It seemed safe enough.

He strapped his Navies more tightly around him, pulled off his jackboots, carefully lifted the near side of the skylight as far as its hinges would allow, and lowered himself inside.

He hung by his hands swinging his feet, groping for the table. It was farther below than he thought. He dropped. The table was there. Alighting, he knocked something to the floor. It struck with a slight rattle on the rug. He crouched on the table, looking about him at the blackness, listening. He could hear a muffled mutter of voices and the orchestra in the theater below, but no one in the room.

He got off the table, groped, found the box of patent matches, struck one. It was the candle he had knocked off. He lighted it.

Barefoot, he walked around, looking behind furniture, behind the drapes, inside the little parlor, and in a third room containing nothing except a chair and the bed where Malloy slept. He tried the doors. They were locked, but he bolted them, too. Then, working systematically, he searched the room. He took everything out, examined it, and put it back again. He worked for at least an hour. At last all that was left was the strongbox, and it was locked. He lifted it. It was very heavy. A box that heavy contained gold. Using his bowie he managed to get its lock turned. It contained several buckskin pokes of gold dust with the initials I.J.R. burned in, also the greater portion of the gold and silver sponge they had taken in the robbery near Last Chance, some papers and a quantity of greenbacks, but not the parchment he was looking for.

He put it all back, closed and locked the box, and pressed out some of the nicks he had made with the bowie. He had a last look around, but he knew that his search had been fruitless.

Now he was presented with the problem of getting out. There were outside windows from both the bedroom and the parlor, but mosquito cloth was tacked over them, and it would be a long drop to the ground. He decided to go back through the skylight.

He unbolted the doors, placed a chair on the table and stood on it, but the skylight was still about eighteen inches beyond his reach. Steadying himself with one hand on the ceiling he climbed to the back of the chair, stood with a momentarily shaky balance, and got hold of the sill. Hanging there he hooked the chair with his toes, swung it off the table, and dropped it to the floor.

After long quiet it struck with what seemed to be a fearful thud and crash. He chinned himself, almost lost balance and toppled back, but a final effort brought him forward on his knees with his hands on the rough gravel of the roof, and suddenly he realized that there was a man beside him, and a gun's cold, round muzzle was pressed against the back of his head.

He remained on all fours. He did not move.

"Don't try nothing, Comanche!" It was the voice of Huckven. "Don't try nothing, because it'd be a pleasure for me to kill you!"

Chapter Nine

A Rough Rope and a Good Drop

HE SAW OTHER MEN NOW, on the roof, a light came on in Malloy's office.

"Waal," said John to Huckven, "I see ye had some help. Good idee to have help when ye go out for the Comanche."

Huckven standing back and sneering through his stringy moustache said, "I didn't need 'em. I'd tooken you myself, *by* myself, if I'd had *my* way. I'd have outdrawn you and killed you, only the boss said no."

Clip Overfelt emerged from hiding behind a chimney and walked over with moonlight flashing on the gun in his hand.

"Walk, Comanche!" said Huckven.

Overfelt said, "Aren't you taking his guns?"

"Hell with 'em. I hope he draws. I only *hope* it!"

"Take his guns!"

"You take 'em."

John said, "Lemme unbuckle 'em."

"Keep your hands clear!" Overfelt, careful not to come in front of Huckven, stepped in gingerly and plucked the Navies from the holsters.

"My boots!" said John.

"Put 'em on."

They waited for him, and walked him to the firehole. Two other men were below. One was George Finch, a short, stocky man wearing a deputy's badge. The other was Max the Ape.

"By grab," said John with satisfaction, "they *do* git their forces out when they go to take the Comanche."

Malloy was seated in his office, a fresh cigar in his teeth.

"What were you searching for?" he asked when John walked in.

"Why I had to investigate. Knights of the Golden Circle, ye know. Make sure ye was the man—"

"Jig's up. You're not here for the Knights. What *were* you here for?"

"I told ye—"

In fury Malloy sprang from his chair. He came around the table with his short barrelled, pearl-handled pistol in his hand. He cried, "I ask a question, I want an answer. The right answer. No lie, but the right answer!"

John tried to retreat and was brought up short by the thrust of Huckven's gun in his back. He tried to get his hands up to take the blow he saw coming, but Malloy brought the gun up and around in a sudden arc, clipping him on the side of the skull, and the next John knew he was down on hands and knees, his ears deaf and ringing.

Instinctively he tried to get to his feet. He fell face forward with his mouth open and his eyes glazed. He heard Malloy shout, "Get him off the floor. Put him in the chair. Get his hands tied."

He knew everything they were doing, but he was unable to move. He knew when they dragged him to a chair and tied his forearms to the arm rests. Malloy was still shouting questions at him. His voice came in waves with pain. He could hear the words but they seemed meaningless. Finally Malloy gave up and went somewhere. A long time seemed to pass. John came awake thinking it must at least be the next afternoon, but the room was still candlelit,

and not a hint of morning yet came through the window overhead.

"Looking for Malloy?" Huckven asked. "He'll be back. With the judge. The legal, elected judge, *Union* judge, the Honorable Cincinnatus Harrison. Nothing old Cincy would rather do than hang a Johnny reb. Especially one on the prowl for the Knights of the Golden Circle. You picked the wrong camp. This be a *Union* camp."

He turned his head, it pained him but he turned it. He saw the Ape, and George Finch, the deputy. Apparently they'd been waiting a considerable time, for Finch had made himself comfortable on the divan.

John tried to speak. His mouth was thick and thirsty. "I need a drink."

"The hell you do!" said Huckven.

Finch opened his eyes and said, "Give him a drink."

"Who in hell's giving orders around here?"

"Give him a drink!"

So Huckven got a dipper of water and held it to John's lips while he drank, but he got weary before the water was gone, and dumping the remainder in John's face tossed the dipper back in its bucket.

"Thank-ee," said John.

"Don't thank me. I'd as leave it war pizen."

A door had opened and closed, there was a stir of air, and he heard voices. They were in the parlor. One was Malloy. Another had a pompous, orator's way of talking.

"Speak of the devil!" said the deputy, sitting up on the edge of the divan, yawning and rubbing his hair, and John knew that the pompous voice belonged to Judge Cincinnatus Harrison.

He heard Malloy say, "I quite agree, and that's what I've been trying to tell you all the time. It has to be done legally. *Everything* has to be done legally."

"We'll give him a fair, impartial, public trial and hang him afterward. But I strongly suggest the charge be murder and robbery and the Knights of the Circle be left out of it. There are entirely too many Confederate sympathizers in New Boston to divide the town."

"Agreed."

"Evidence?"

"You'll have your evidence."

Malloy then lowered his voice and there was a considerable span of conversation lost to John, then the Judge said, "Indeed, yes! If that fur company grant is in your possession, by all means move them off the ground at once. Why, man, your mining equipment will be here and you haven't even test-drilled the ground."

So John had been correct concerning the deep gravel deposit. The White Pine held millions for an outfit with the brains and the capital to take it.

I've really ruint things now, thought John. *Parson should never have sent for me. Shouldn't have tried to outfigure Malloy. Should just have shot him.*

Judge Cincinnatus Harrison came in and looked at him. The Judge was a soft looking man of fifty, his face red and pouchy. Tonight he was neither drunker nor soberer than usual. He wore black serge, its front stained by food, drink and cigar ash. In his hand he carried a rolled-up umbrella. No one had ever seen Harrison open the umbrella; he used it as a cane, it added to his dignity.

He burped and said, "Is this the defendant? I don't want to hang the wrong man."

Hoss Noon and Oregon were in the hall, and Hoss said to Finch, "You're supposed to deputize us."

"How in hell can I deputize you? The sheriff has to do that and he's in Hangtown."

"I'll deputize you," said Harrison. "Lift your right hands, I declare you deputies of the court empowered to enforce its authority within the boundaries of the Territory of Montana."

Hoss was drunk as always. He whooped and kicked his boots in the air and said, "Whoopee! Always wanted to be a deppity. They's six men in this camp I'm aiming to shoot."

Things had come to life on the lower floor. From everywhere John could hear the boots and voices of men. In the distance someone was beating a drum. Oregon went to look and came back saying, "That's Foolish Mike Peabody again. I wonder how *he* got wind of it so soon? His shack's a mile down the gulch."

Foolish Mike was sort of a town crier who went around beating his drum whenever there was important news, passing the hat for small color. Out of money and lacking other news, Foolish Mike was not above inventing Union or Confederate victories, either of which paid off well from New Boston's partisan populace, but tonight he had real news, and they could hear his hoarse voice accentuated by the boom of the drum, "They caught him, they caught him! (*boom! boom!*) Comanche John. (*boom!*) He'll rob no more, they'll hang him. (*boom! boom!*) He robbed the sluice at Whiskey Gulch. Killed three men, killed three men. Shot 'em down in co-old blood."

And he came booming closer and closer until they could feel the impact of the bass drum from the street below, and there he went on reciting the details of the Whisky Gulch sluice robbery a month before, a foul piece of business in which three miners had been shot from ambush.

John rolling his head around to get the ache from it said, "Ain't I guilty of enough without inventing things? I never robbed a sluice in my life. Sluice robbing to my mind is the next lowest thing to slave stealing."

"How about ambush?" Finch asked.

"Waal, how about it? Ask *Huckven* how about it. He's a man with more experience with ambush than anybody else in this room."

A man came in breathlessly and said, "Judge says bring the prisoner before they tear the place down."

Under Finch's direction the rawhide thongs were unfastened freeing John from the chair. Huckven kept him covered. "Tie his hands behind him," Finch said, and the harsh rawhide was used again. Looking around Finch asked, "Where are his guns?"

"Guns?" Huckven and Overfelt looked at each other.

"Yes, his guns! Do you think you'll get away with them, sell them and pocket the money? Like hell you will, this is a trial and the guns are the murder weapons. They're exhibit A. So get 'em and have 'em at the jail."

"And be damn careful not to tamper with 'em!" John called at Huckven's back. "You git them Navies out o' kilter I'll come around and blast six cubits out o' your middle."

"You'll be dead, and six foot under with your neck stretched out longer'n a whooping crane's. You'll do nothing to nobody!"

The rawhide thongs hurt him when he moved. "Mighty tight, mighty painful," he said.

"Mighty dead the three you bushwhacked at Whisky Gulch," said Overfelt in his tight-lipped way, prodding

him with the gun muzzle in the back.

"You ought to know!"

"We found the gold on you."

"Ye *did?*"

"Exhibit B!"

"Why, ye plan fast, ye *do* fast. I knew it! I knew I should have stayed north of this camp of New Boston."

They walked him to the hall, down the stairs. The air was close from the smell of the crowd packed on the floor below. "Make way, make way!" the Ape was saying, pushing through, shouldering men this way and that. "Don't touch the prisoner."

Men filled the lower rooms, they stood on card tables, they boosted themselves on the bar to get a glimpse of him. "It's him, it's the Comanche!" they were saying. "I seen him in Placerville one time." "Why, I seen *him* around town, *he* the Comanche?" Someone was playing a comb wrapped in paper, stopping at regular intervals to sing in a nasal voice:

"Co-man-che came to I-de-ho
With a pal named Injun Ike,
A very shady character
Who had broke from jail in Pike;
But Ike got drunk in Lewiston
And ended up in jail,
And they hung him to a cottonwood
Ere John could go his bail."

"We'll write the last verse of that doggerel tonight," a man whooped.

"There he comes!" Those on the street were shouting. "They're bringing the killer now."

"Don't give him a trial! Give him the same chance he gave the boys at Whisky Gulch. Hang him now!"

Someone swung a blow at John as he passed. He weaved, and the blow knocked his hat off. He could not pick it up. His hat was trampled. Someone else picked it up and stuck it back on his head.

"Keep away from the prisoner!" Finch was shouting. "He'll get a fair trial before we hang him. I'll kill any man tries to take my prisoner away from me."

"What you got to say for yourself, killing honest men from ambush?" a tall man shouted in his ear as he passed.

John answered, "I say killing them was a typical Yankee trick and I'm for Jeff Davies! I say I waren't even in the country when that was done and give me a day or two and I can prove it!"

"Listen to him! He wants a day or two! We're supposed to feed him at public expense for *two* days while he proves he ain't where he was."

Some pitch torches burned brightly with large volumes of smoke before the log building that served as a claim recorder's office, judge's office and jail. He was taken toward it, carried in the sweep of the crowd. Newly sworn deputies were posted to keep clear the front steps of the jail.

Judge Harrison, smelling of freshly consumed liquor, met them grandly with a law book under his right arm.

"Hold it outside!" everyone started to shout, and he acceded to the demand telling two of the deputies to carry his table to the walk.

The platform was a couple of feet off the ground and once there a man could breathe. A barrel of rain water stood near the door and John was tempted to dip his head in it, but if he did it would be like somebody to hold him under. Besides, the water gave him an idea. It was such an idea that made him want to whoop in glee, but he did not. He stood and looked like a condemned

man should look. If only he could get himself *close* to the barrel, and if only it was full enough!

Judge Harrison clubbed the table with a gavel. He did not call a jury. He remarked in a loud voice there was just time before the trial for the spectators to repair to their favorite bar for a drink of Old Stonehouse Bourbon and started calling the names of witnesses.

He swore in everyone who happened to raise his hand, saying the familiar sentence all in one breath, and then said, "Hoss Noon, take the stand."

Hoss stood and testified that John when arrested had two pokes of gold marked with the burned-in initials I.J.R. The two pokes were displayed. They were two of the pokes he had seen in Malloy's strongbox. They were identified as genuine. The gold was identified as the type found in Whisky Gulch. The guns were shown to be .36 caliber like those used in the ambush, and for that matter, like two-thirds of the pistols in camp.

"Evidence conclusive," shouted Harrison. He banged the table with his gavel. "Prisoner guilty. By the power vested in me by the Territorial Legislature and his honor the Governor, all duly elected by the citizens of this territory, I sentence the prisoner to hang by the neck until he is dead. Move out o' the way over there so the boys can get the freight wagon up to the mercantile platform, use it for a drop. We'll hang him off the jut-end of the awning."

"Hold on," said John, "can't I speak in my own behalf? What kind of court of law ye running here?"

"Prisoner guilty, no sense in taking up the time of the court." He waved a stubby hand at the gold and John's brace of Navies. "Somebody carry these inside and provide for their safekeeping until such time as proper heirs and assigns have been established, boy, will you run down to the Montana and fetch me a pint of Old Stonehouse Bourbon. the pride of all Kentucky Bourbons aged in the wood!"

As a sideline Judge Harrison was agent for the distillery and never missed an opportunity for advertising his product.

"Dang ye!" cried John, "right here in my pocket I can prove it's *illegal* to hang me. I can prove I was already hung over in I-de-ho City. Haven't ye ever heerd o' double jepordy? What kind of lawyer do ye call yourself anyhow?"

"Prisoner be quiet. Court will fine prisoner for contempt."

"What more can ye do to me than hang me?"

"Hang you with a rough rope. Lead this prisoner away."

"It ain't easy on a man, being hung," John said changing his tone to one of sadness. "Even for a man like me, road agent, gunman wicked to shame Gomorrah. No, it ain't. Ain't easy going to face your maker with sin on your soul and your lamp of righteousness nigh run empty. And I got dear ones at home. I don't guess you men of New Boston would want to swing a man without him having a fitten time to pray, and to write to his loved ones."

"Give him time!" some of them started to shout, but others were up angrily demanding, "How much time did he give the boys in Whisky Gulch?"

"Gents, all I ask is a minister to help me pray and I'll hang with your praise on my lips."

Harrison, judging the temper of the crowd said, "Compromise. Give you half an hour. Don't think we'll have

the scaffold all fixed much short of that anyhow. Boy, boy, where's my Old Stonehouse Bourbon, the queen of Kentucky whiskies, aged ten long years in the wood?"

Malloy came through from the office and said, "What the devil! Get that man hanged."

"Not the will of the sovereign majority," said Judge Harrison.

"Well, keep watch of him. I don't trust some of these deputies of yours."

"What happened to Frenchy, Oregon, Step-and-a-Half and them?"

"I told you. I need them out on White Pine."

"You *don't* waste time!"

"I don't believe in wasting time. This is the ideal moment. Everyone is *here.* A little shooting out there will never be noticed." He dropped to the ground, and climbed to the high platform of the Territorial Mercantile Co. next door where two men were arguing about placing the hangrope. Things speeded under Malloy's direction. The crowd was parted and a freight wagon with its endgate down was backed around beneath a projecting timber of the pole awning. A rope was tossed over the timber and Malloy with nimble fingers wrapped a hangman's knot in the end. "Pull it up!" he said, and they did, leaving the knot swinging with its grim loop in the light of the torches.

It was evident they intended to stand their man on the wagon and hang him merely by driving it forward. Several in the crowd, old Californy men, objected saying he would not be given a good drop.

"I believe in hanging," one of the Californy men kept saying over and over, "but I believe in giving 'em a good drop."

Malloy decided to move the wagon further out and place a plank between the wagonbox and the store platform. As before the drop would be released by driving the wagon forward, but the plank would allow the condemned man a straight fall.

"Good idee!" said the Californy man. "Never swing 'em, drop 'em. I say you can tell if a camp is first class by the way they stage their hangings."

John said, "I be mighty weary," and edged to the rain barrel.

"Fifteen minutes gone," someone said. "Judge holding tight to that half hour?"

"We'll give him no half hour," Huckven said. "We'll hang him whenever the scaffold's fixed."

"Well, she's nigh fixed."

Seeing John edge by the rain barrel, Huckven shouted, "Stay whar you are!"

"I'm tired. Surely ye can't deny a dying man the support of leaning on a bar'l."

"Skeered he'll get away from you?" someone taunted Huckven.

"No, I'm not skeered. I wish he'd try. I just wish it."

It had been a wet summer. There had been no nearby fires. The barrel was almost full. It was cool against his back. He tried to get his hands over the edge, but the rawhide wrappings were too tight. He got on tiptoe, he scissored his way up the barrel as if trying to sit on the edge. Huckven was watching, but John's back and hands were in shadow and he did not realize that he had worked them over the edge of the barrel and that now they were plunged deep in the cool, stale water.

The rawhide was still tight, but its hard edge quickly softened. It became slick against his wrists. He kept work-

ing his arms and hands with a steady back and forth movement feeling the rawhide loosen as it grew wet.

"Bring the prisoner," said Malloy.

"Half an hour!" shouted John. "I got twenty minutes yet."

"Your half hour started in the Montana House."

A man from the crowd shouted, "It started when you bushwhacked those poor boys over in Whisky Gulch!"

Then a familiar voice came from across the heads of the crowd, "Lemme through, lemme through, brothers! Make way for a preacher on a sad errand. Don't stand in the way of a minister on his way to comfort the dying. Thank-e, thank-e."

It was the Parson. Malloy saw him and cursed. Huckven lifted his Navy and aimed it at the Parson's gray head and Malloy barked, "Don't, you damn fool!"

"This the man, this the poor condemned man?" the Parson said, pointing to Comanche John. "The black-whiskered one? Repent ye! Are ye ready to repent? Please, gents, your favor! Let me be alone with this poor condemned man only a minute, I'll be personally responsible for his conduct. Let me take him inside."

"You can be alone with him out there!" Malloy said, pointing to the plank.

The Parson was close then, and John said from the side of his mouth, "Don't you worry about me. They'll put no rope on my neck. You git to the valley. Git and git fast, this is the hour Malloy has chosen to run ye out of your homes."

"John, you'll never get away. This is your finish. You've spit in the catamount's eye once too often and *this* time you're bound to git clawed."

"Mebby, but I'll claw right back." He kept twisting his hands. The rawhide was far stretched now. He worked the bindings until they were all in one mass, and looser than ever. He could have slipped his hands out, but he didn't. He let them stay. He moved his hands from the barrel. He pressed them tight against his back, getting the water off.

"Pray for me, Parson, don't make 'em suspicious."

The Parson prayed as minutes passed and the crowd became impatient. At last the deputies pushed him out of the way.

"Git!" said John to him. "Saddle and ride. Fight 'em off. Give 'em a bellyful of lead and I'll wager before the sun sets tomorrow I'll get that grant to ye. I won't promise, but I'll wager it!"

Men gathered on both sides of Comanche John and led him from the jail platform, to the ground, and up four steps to the platform of the Mercantile. He walked to the plank and there they left him. He stood on the plank, hands behind him, testing its spring.

"Man might fall off'n here," he said. "Thing like this could be dangerous."

Someone in the crowd whooped, "You'll fall off but you'll never hit the ground!"

John made a last survey of the scene. He located the door to the judge's office, his Navies which were inside on the table. He judged the distance from the plank to the ground, his best route beneath the platform. The chief portion of the crowd would stampede when the shooting commenced, and that would help. Everything was ready.

Then with a casual shift of his feet he stepped on the edge of the plank and it flipped over, sending him to the ground.

He pulled his hands free of the rawhide and dived head foremost beneath the platform. Frightened by the sudden movement and the falling plank, the team bolted. The crowd went scattering, the driver was dragged by the reins, bootheels in the ground.

On hands and feet, traveling with the speed and agility of a baboon, John bounded through the pilings and braces. He came briefly into the open not five feet from Huckven, but in the milling crowd nobody saw him. He might have escaped between the store and the jail, but he wanted his Navies.

He crossed the platform, ducked through the door, grabbed up his Navies and almost ran into Judge Harrison who was coming from the rear of the building to see what the excitement was.

The Judge stopped, mouth agape, making no sound.

"Tonight," said John, ramming one of the Navies in the Judge's stomach, "ye will see invoked a portion of the law never gone into much by Blackstone. This here is called the Colt statchoot, she's got six sections, and they's no appeal from any of 'em. Now, maybe I'll invoke it and maybe I won't. It depends on whether you're more alive or dead. So do what I say. Pick up the candle. Walk and keep me in the shadow. Be blamed *sure* I'm in the shadow!"

The room was lighted by three candles in a reflecting holder. Holding this light ahead of him, the Judge did as John commanded. He paused at the door with John right behind him.

"We'll go yonder," John said. "To the left, tight agin' the building. If I'm lucky, and *you're* lucky, nobody'll see us at all."

But a man sang out, "Huckven! *Look there, behind the Judge!*"

Judge Harrison, his muscles solidified by fear, had stopped in the wrong place. Comanche John tripped him and rammed him sprawling from the platform. It left John in the clear then for three running strides. A gun exploded so close he could feel the burn of powder and the wind of passing lead against the back of his neck. He turned. He saw Huckven with smoking guns in his hands swinging for another shot. He fired with his left hand Navy and the bullet doubled the tall Huckven in the middle as though he'd been struck by a club. Huckven staggered forward and recovered enough to fire both pistols wildly as a second slug hit him and spun him, wrapping one leg around the other and dropping on his back with his arms out.

"Thar ye been looking for it!" John whooped. He made a long leap from the platform as bullets from four different directions tore splinters from the corner of the building.

He answered with a stream of lead from both Navies. The street was a wild, shoving, cursing stampede for cover.

John ducked behind the platform walk of the jail. Crabwise he got himself back in the narrow passage between the jail and a Chinese washee. Bullets came in volleys. A bullet ripped along the wall carving splinters that stung his face and showered his pulled-down hat.

"Whar are ye, Walker Malloy?" he whooped. "Come out, bring your deppitys, tell 'em it's suppertime and I'm serving red-hot biscuits, everyone guaranteed to last a lifetime."

Missou was coming belly-down beneath the platform. John saw and drove him back with one ear and half the brim of the hat shot away.

"Ya-hoo!" shouted Comanche John, kicking dust with his jackboots, "ye know who I be? Waal, listen and I'll tell ye. I'm Comanche John from Yuba Gulch. I was born in Pike County, Missouri and raised on catfish and corn likker. I pick my teeth with the cactus bush and drink water out of the crick like a horse. Last winter I craved raw meat and was plumb out o' bullets so I lit into a grizzly ba'r with my teeth. Now, if ye should see a three-legged grizzly give him room because he deetests the sight o' man. Waal, I crave raw meat *tonight*, and I ain't seen a grizzly in two-three week, so clear out o' my way and give me room because I'm shootin' mad with my Navy guns."

Chapter Ten

"*Share and Share Alike*"

HE RETREATED between the buildings, firing his guns dry. There was darkness and the rising steepness of the gulch at the rear. Ambush in that direction. He found a side door to the washee. He went inside, met by damp heat and laundry smells. Someone in the dark was babbling Chinese.

"Ho thar!" said John. "I'm short of lead tonight and don't figure on shooting no Chinymen. Git me out o' hyar. Come on, damn ye, or don't ye speak human?"

There were Chinese on all sides of him now, all chattering. One of them opened a rear door. He could see the gray of approaching dawn through it. The area behind the washee was full of movement. Malloy was shouting orders in one direction. Finch in another. He stopped for a moment of indecision and thought of the roof. He ran from one end of the washee to the other cursing under his breath. "Every place has a firehole. Even a Chinee place should have a firehole."

He located some wooden cleats pegged to the wall. He climbed. They led through a lid door to the roof. He pushed it aside, emerged into the open. The roof was wide and flat. He ran, crouched over; he leaped the intervening five or six feet to the gable roof of the saloon next door. He climbed over the ridge, slid down the far side, slowing his descent by digging the nails of his bootheels. He dropped to earth without breaking a leg and stood against the wall breathing and taking a quick look front and back. He decided to return to the street. Men were on the run trying to get in on the fight or escape from it. In the general flux no one paid the slightest heed to him. He walked. He reloaded his Navies while he walked. The crowd had thinned out. He was all by himself walking. A young man carrying a Navy in his hand came on the run and rammed into him. The fellow rebounded against the front of a saloon and became popeyed when he saw who John was.

"Yep," John said, a Navy aimed at his middle, "it's me, the Comanche, and ye lived to tell the tale. Now, I'll just take your Navy to keep ye out of trouble."

He took it and walked on with the young man gaping at him, too stunned and trembly to say a word. He entered a dark side street. He ran. He climbed a zig-zag trail up the gulch. He circled a cluster of small buildings and doubled back to the rear of the Montana House. The doors were all open; there was not a soul in the place. He dumped over card tables, tossed chairs in a heap, found the store of camphene for the stage lights. Camphene was a mixture

of turpentine and alcohol, and almost explosive as gunpowder. "Why, this was like for the purpose," John said, drenching the heap with it and adding a keg of whale oil for good measure. He tossed a lighted candle in and watched the flame take hold and spread. Then he went out the back and waited, chawing and getting his breath, giving a satisfied ear to the roaring progress of the fire.

"Fire! Fire!" Foolish Mike Peabody was shouting, booming his bass drum. "Fire in the Montana House, pray for rain!"

Already smoke was rolling through open doors and windows. In the distance came the clang-clang of the new pumping wagon. Soon the volunteer fire laddies had the intake end of their hose in the muddy sluice-tail discharge of the gulch, playing a stream inside, producing great volumes of steam while in no way halting the spread of the flames.

"Save the likker!" men were shouting. "To hell with that piano, save the likker!"

Two men came on the run through the back alleyway—Malloy and Max the Ape. They passed John so close he could have hit them with tobacco juice, and up the stairs they charged two steps at a time.

"Working out fine," said John. "Working like a Swiss-lander clock. It's like I told the Parson, what ye need is a man with brains. Man that'll figure things out, judge human nature. Want to make a man do the right thing all ye got to do is make him itch in the right place. Now Malloy has got a thing to save and a thing to hide. He'll walk into my arms and all I need do is be ready for him."

He checked his Navies and put them back in their holsters. He sauntered to the stairway. He yawned, and scratched his whiskers, and looked around at the dawn thinking it would be better if it were not so light, and better still if he had a horse ready. But his horse was yonder in the corral, and folks hereabouts still had plenty of diversion.

Then he heard Malloy and the Ape at the head of the stairs; they were struggling with the heavy strongbox.

"Put it down, we'll slide it," Malloy said.

They did, letting it thud-thud down the steps, the Ape below checking its descent, Malloy tugging it by a handle above.

At the bottom they let it sit while straightening to rest their backs, and at that second Malloy saw John.

"Yep," said John, slouching toward them, "it be me. I run, but I didn't run far. Just far enough to start that bonfire, wait out behind knowing ye'd bring it—the gold sponge, the gold from Whisky Gulch, and that paper, the fur company grant ye talked poor Wally Snite into stealing, and then kilt him in payment. Thought you'd want to share it. Share and share alike's my motto."

John had not drawn his Navies. His hands were nowhere near his Navies. He stood scratching the side of his neck with his right hand and a place under his ribs with his left. He was chawing and he turned to spit, and Malloy, with a sudden, bitter laugh, saw what he thought was his chance and with a leap and quarter whirl went for the pearl-handled gun at his waist.

He was fast, faster than John had expected, and in moving he had placed himself partially behind the broad form of the Ape, but John, with a forward slouch and a straightening of his body,

beat him to the draw. He seemed almost casual about it, yet the guns were there in his hands and the backward tilt of his body had pointed them. They exploded. One of the bullets hit Malloy in the region of his left shoulder. It was not a fatal wound, but the shock of lead sent him reeling and off balance. He fired one shot into the ground. He turned, his gun making a silvery gleam in the dawn. He fired once again just as two slugs from John's Navies hit him with a coupled impact that knocked him flat in the dust.

The Ape had meantime dived for cover. He got in one wild shot and no more.

Then it was all over and John stood over them looking at them through the smoke of his guns.

"Why, this is what I should have done in the first place. *Would* have, too, only that dratted parson talked me out of it."

The parchment had not been inside the strongbox and probably it was not there now. He had a hunch, and it proved a good one. He found it the first grab, inside the breast pocket of Malloy's coat.

"Leave it like this," he said. "Stolen gold, Malloy's strongbox, Malloy beside it. Even a pack of Union abolitionists ought to see the guilty one *now*. Waal, it's no never mind for me. I've sickened of this place. Too many houses, too many people. By grab, the country's getting too damn civilized. Next thing those farmers out on the bottoms will be plowing and planting and you won't be able to tell Montana from Ioway. It's the north country for me, the Blackfeet country, Canady even."

He went to the livery stable, found everyone gone, watching the fire. He saddled his gunpowder horse and rode up-gulch and over the hills. In the distance toward White Pine was gunfire, a few shots separated by minutes of quiet. The sun rose and shone hot and good on his back making him shed his buckskin jacket. He sat, letting his horse graze, and had a long view of the valley. None of the buildings had been burned, everything seemed peaceful, but the guns kept popping intermittently. He rode, following the sound and saw where Overfelt, Noon, Step-and-a-Half and that bunch were holed up among some boulders at the near edge of the valley while the farmers were smoking them from two sides.

It was a fair sight, and he enjoyed it. He considered stirring the "deputies" up from the rear and decided against it. "Had *my* fun," he said. "No use of intruding in on *their* fun. No use to be hoggish. Let 'em have the satisfaction of saving their homes for themselves. Besides, if I went thar and made a hero of myself I'd likely be drug off to be feasted by that Cobb woman. She'd git me at my comfort, feet up, in a rocking chair, full of her stew, and fritters, can't tell what I'd do. Marry her even."

He rode, avoiding the houses. From a distance he hailed the Shallerbach kid who was sentry against surprise attack. He gave him the parchment, told him to deliver it to the Parson, and asked concerning the events of the night before. The Parson, young Shallerbach said, had busted in at a gallop and warned them just in time. "We met 'em with smoking lead!" the kid said. "Teach *them* a lesson about claim jumping. What's this paper anyhow?"

"You give it to the Parson, *he'll* know what it is."

He rode on, crossed White Pine Creek deep as the gunpowder's belly

and rode up a winding draw that split the hills to the north. He could no longer hear any shooting. He kept the horse at a jog. He rode with his black slouch hat on the back of his head favoring the spot where Malloy had slugged him the night before. He seemed sleepy, but his eyes had a wary habit, watching as the country opened in new vistas with each turn in the draw. And sometimes he sang, his voice a tuneless monotone, the words bumped from him by the movements of the horse:

". . . Waal, I hail from old Missouri
Up in the County Pike,
And whenever I draw m'Navies out
It's share and share alike!"

THE END

WILD WILLIES OF THE WEST

A Quiz by "The Sage of Sapello"

JUST FOR THE HELL OF IT, let's give imaginary nicknames to a batch of Southwestern animals familiar to every cowboy, each nickname suggesting some special characteristic or habit, and see if you can match them with the animals they fit. "Warty Shorty," for instance, would fit the horned toad. Correct answers (according to me!) are on page 49.

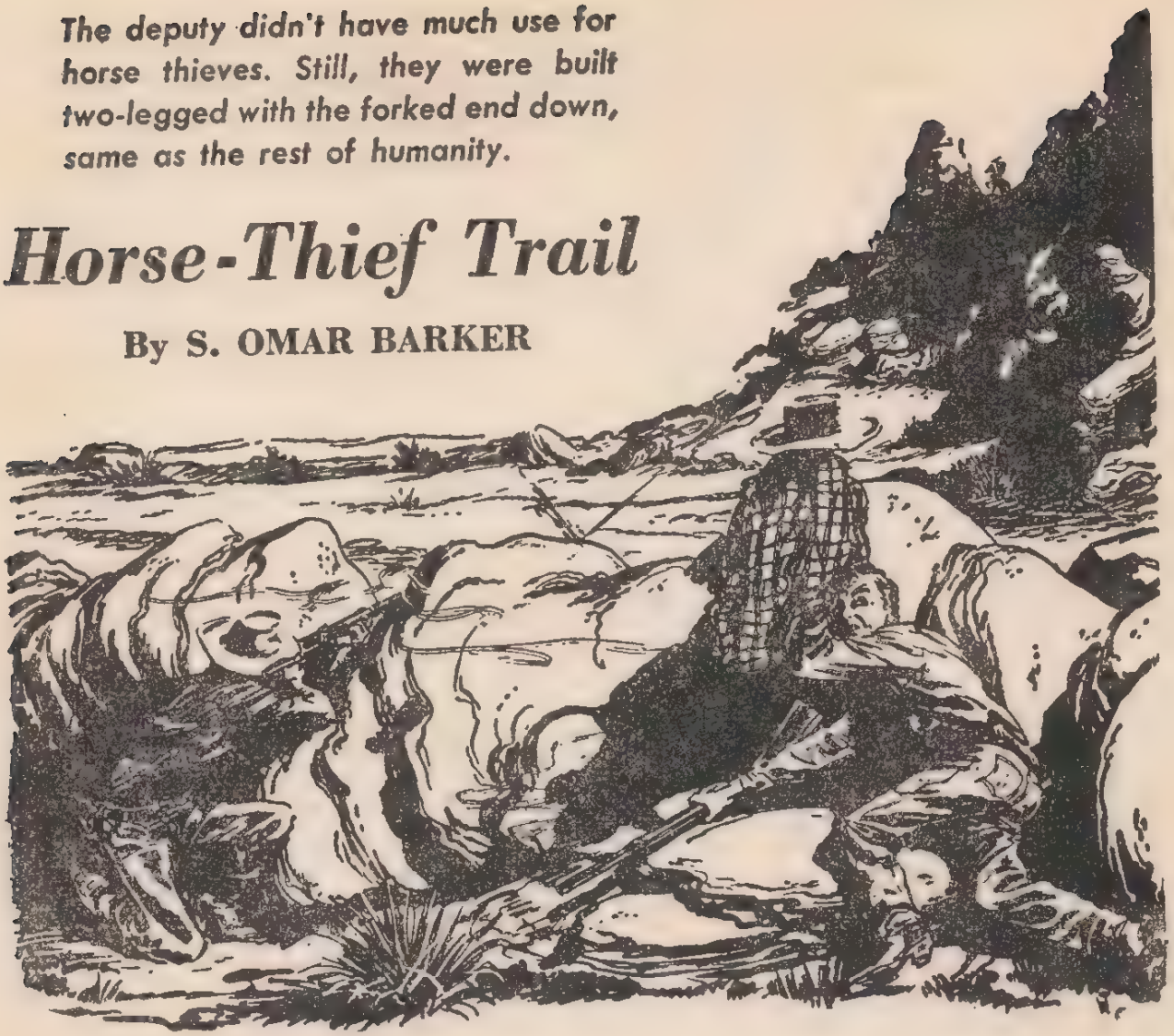
1. Coyote
2. Badger
3. Skunk
4. Mountain lion
5. Gray wolf
6. Bear
7. Pronghorn antelope
8. Rattlesnake
9. Jackrabbit
10. Prairie dog
11. Bobcat
12. Raccoon
13. Porcupine
14. Trade rat
15. Armadillo
16. Beaver
17. Mule deer
18. Chickaree squirrel
19. Javelina or peccary
20. Rock squirrel

A. Swappin' Sam
B. Pincushion Pete
C. Stub-Tail Tom
D. Digger Dan
E. High-Jump Jack
F. Howlin' Herman
G. Long-Tail Leo
H. Lumberjack Joe
I. Buzz-Tail Bert
J. Hamstring Hank
K. Deep-Hole Dave
L. Chatterin' Charley
M. Mule-Ear Mike
N. Bristle-Back Barney
O. Look-Far Luke
P. Back-Up Bill
Q. Rock-Pile Robert
R. No-Hair Herbert
S. Ring-Tail Roscoe
T. Hibernatin' Hiram

The deputy didn't have much use for horse thieves. Still, they were built two-legged with the forked end down, same as the rest of humanity.

Horse-Thief Trail

By S. OMAR BARKER



WE WAS ONLY a four-man posse. Eight or ten would of made me feel more comfortable, for I had a hunch the fellers we was after might play rough. But every usable cowpoke in the country was out with one or another of the wagons on the roundup anywheres from fifty to a hundred miles away, and this horse-thief trail was fresh. Which it wouldn't be if I'd taken time to send that far for more help.

Besides, the man that owned the stolen stock had already throwed a fit over the time it had took me just to git aholt of Sam Purdy and Hoolio Archuleta. Give him his way and him and me would have took out after the thieves in a hissin' hot hurry, jüst the two of us. Maybe I was born that foolish, but I'd sure outgrowed it.

This hurry-up horse owner was a newcomer named Felix X. Vandolen. He'd hit the Sabinita country with enough *pesos* in his poke to purchase a piece of the old Ed Evans ranch and start stocking it with higher-priced horseflesh than us New Mexico cowpokes was used to, mainly Thoroughbreds. So when Luke Lantry's outlaw gang dipped into his pasture and run

off twenty-odd head of brood mares, it nicked him purty deep. I couldn't much blame him for being all of a fidget to take after them.

Anyway, I figgered it was some of the Luke Lantry wild bunch, with maybe some local help, because they was supposed to have a purty well established horse-thief trail running all the way from Mexico to Montana, with plenty of hid-out camps and hard-to-ketch help to rush stolen horses out of their home country mighty quick and quiet. This trail was supposed to run through some purty rough country some sixty miles from Sabinitas, off west of Ladrón Mesa.

Just who all rode with this Lantry gang, or was somehow tied up with them in this part of the country, nobody knowed for sure. I hadn't ever mentioned it to nobody, but I had reason to suspect they had picked up a new recruit right here in the Sabinitas country some time purty recent.

I also had reasons for not airing my suspicions. Personal reasons, that is. There's many a foolish young cowboy been turned down by some gal and made that his excuse for going to the wild bunch. I happened to know of one that Mary-Beth McCluney had turned down hard, and Mary-Beth was the gal I was going to marry, come June if this deputy-sheriff job didn't get me killed first.

We picked up this horse-thief trail half a mile from where they had cut Vandolen's fence. It led off up Pedregal Canyon toward Ladrón Mesa. The tracks was easy enough to follow, but the rocky ground made the sign hard to read. After about three miles of studying tracks as we rode, Hoolio quit watching the ground, so I reckoned he had it about figgered out. Vandolen had already told us none of the stolen stuff was shod.

"How many, Hoolio?" I asked him.

He held up four fingers, which was all he had on that hand. "Three, four horse got some shoe," he said. "Maybe-so five, but I don' theenk! The rest all bare feets."

"That'll make us about one outlaw apiece," grinned Sam Purdy. "I'll be glad to spare mine if any of you boys run short! That is, if we ever overtake 'em. What you say, Mr. Vandolen?"

"I say we'll certainly never overtake them at this rate!" snorted Vandolen with a hard look at me. He was riding one of his long-legged Thoroughbreds, and I'd had a hard time keeping him from hitting the trail on a dead run which would of plumb wore out his horse and ours too in the first five miles.

I didn't say anything, but I still stayed in the lead, setting a moderate pace I figgered our horses could stand all day if they had to. With the start they had, I knew we didn't have a Chinaman's chance to overtake the thieves anyhow unless something made them either stop or slow down right smart which I figgered something might.

Way yonder ahead rose the reddish rock rampart of Ladrón Mesa. At that distance I could barely make out the slight notch where Pedregal Canyon's narrow split came out of it. At that point I knew the trail took a steep turn upward through a big batch of broke-off boulders to climb the Mesa. It was the only place for a good twenty miles north or south where the Mesa could be crossed a-horseback. If I was a horse thief, I figgered, and wanted to cure anybody of trying to foller me, that's where I'd do it

Once in a while this narrow Pedregal

Canyon widened out so we could ride abreast, and I was just fixing to explain to Mr. Vandolen why I figgered these horse rustlers might push the ponies on ahead and stop to throw an ambush somewhere on that steep trail up Ladrón Mesa, when yonder ahead a black-hatted man on a bony gray horse came riding into the draw over a low saddle to the right.

"Look!" squawked Vandolen, pawing his pearl-handled sixbang out of its brand-new holster. "There's one of 'em now!"

Of course he would of missed at that distance anyhow, but he was so excited he would sure of taken a shot at this feller on the gray horse if I hadn't squared off quick in front of him.

"Just hold your spit, Mr. Vandolen," I told him. "That ain't no horse thief. It's ol' Ed Evans, the man you bought your place from!"

The old man had come onto the tracks of the stolen horses and was sidled in his saddle studying them when we rode up. He was a thin, proud-looking ol' cowpoke of close to seventy, with a plumb white beard and watery blue eyes under bushy brows that never had turned white like his whiskers.

His saddle was a battered old hull that showed the wear and tear of many a year of cow work, his shotgun chaps cracked out at the knees and his faded blue shirt was patched on the elbows. He had on a six-shooter, there was a Winchester in a scuffed old scabbard under his left leg, and he carried a short double-barreled shotgun across the saddle.

"Mornin', Ed," I greeted him. "How come you ridin' this far from taw with all that artillery?"

"I seen some dust, Tolly," he said, "an' come to take a look. Figgered there didn't belong to be nobody drivin' stock over the Mesa this time o' year unless it was stole."

"I reckon you figgered right," I said, "but—"

"They took twenty of my best mares!" broke in Vandolen. "Cut the fence and—"

"Sure bad," said ol' Ed Evans grimly. "If you'll have me, Tolly, I'll throw in with you. If there's anything I hate it's a low-down, sneak-hearted hoss thief!"

"Ed," I said, "you let us handle this. You ain't as young as you was once."

"Nor as rich, but I won't never git too old or too pore to shoot a hoss thief any time I git a chance. Eddie's off north with the Walkin' M roundup, or he'd of come with me. The boy's a better shot than I am, Tolly."

"Ed," I said, for I'd knowed him a long time, "you got no business leavin' Mrs. Evans by herself, sickly like she is. You go on back an'—"

"My ol' lady never was no hand to stand in a man's way when there's a hawg to be skun," he broke in again. "I've done got 'Sus Ortega's gal Pola to go stay with her. Let's git on after them hoss thieves!"

So saying, he struck out briskly up the canyon and I didn't have much choice but to strike out with him, little as I cottoned to having him in the posse. But anyhow, I tried it once more.

"Ed," I said, "you're a durned ol' fool. You *could* get yourself shot on a deal like this. *Then* what'd happen to Mrs. Evans?"

"Don't you worry none about her, Tolly!" He patted me reassuringly on the shoulder and there was a sort of

confident, prideful grin on his fine old face. "Eddie will always look after his ma—a heap better than I ever did, I expect."

There could of been a difference of opinion on that point, but I sure didn't aim to argue it. Ed Evans hadn't married till he was pushing fifty, and his one son was the apple of his eye.

"Okay, Ed," I said. "I just didn't want you to figger you was obligated to put in with this posse if you ain't a-mind to, because me an' these boys—"

"For gosh sake, let's have every man we can get!" busted in Vandolen. "One more man means just that much better chance to recover my mares!"

I couldn't help remembering reports that Vandolen had drove a purty hard bargain in buying the mortgaged land Ed Evans had been obliged to sell on account of the costs of his wife's sickness. Now he was pantin' to get his stolen horses back, and nothin' I could say could stop ol' Ed from coming along to help—at considerable risk of getting himself shot. It's all in the way you look at things, I reckon.

Within another mile the tracks of Vandolen's stolen mares told me they were traveling considerable slower than they had been. In fact, it looked like the four or five thieves on shod horses were having quite some trouble keeping them moving, specially where it was rocky. And the farther up Pedregal Canyon we went, the rockier it got.

I didn't make no mention of this, or what it might mean. I figgered that Sam, Hoolio and ol' Ed Evans could read sign as good as I could, or better, and there wasn't any use to get Mr. Vandolen's hopes up in case my figgering didn't pan out.

Just as I suspected they might be, there was a rear guard of horse thieves laying in wait for us where the Pedregal Canyon suddenly boxed in impassable and the trail turned out up the steep, boulder-bumped, cliff-benched hillside under the raw rock rim of Ladrón Mesa. I was a young deputy sheriff, lined up on the law's side on purpose, and I didn't have no more use for horse thieves than ol' Ed Evans had, but they're built two-legged, with the forked end down, the same as the rest of us, and I've knowed a few that made a career of horse-stealing who would still hesitate about killing a man unless they figgered they had to.

I figgered that was why the first shot from up among the boulders spanged off a rock a dozen feet in front of me instead of hitting any of us. About a hundred and fifty yards up there, just under the rim of the first bench, somebody waved a hat—doubtless on the end of a stick for safety.

"Hey, you jaspers!" he shouted. "We don't like bein' follered! Turn around an' git to hell back to your sheepherdin'—an' there won't be nobody hurt!"

I've always figgered that the best answer to that kind of talk is no answer at all—till you're in shape to say it with hot lead. I got my horse as well out of sight behind a boulder as I could and shucked myself out of the saddle double quick. So did Sam and Hoolio.

I reckon ol' Ed Evans was fixin' to foller suit when he saw what Vandolen was up to. This newcomer was either awful brave or awful ignorant. Instead of ducking like we done, he tried to spur his horse right on up the trail, but the Thoroughbred had spooked considerable at the shot and was rearing and plunging all over hell. Not only was he prob'ly in plain sight of those tough jiggers hid out up ahead, but Vandolen

didn't even have sense enough to keep his mouth shut.

"Hey, you horse thieves!" he hollered. "Surrender in the name of the law or we're coming up there after you!"

Somewhere up there I heard a man laugh. "Come ahead, mister!" the same voice called out. "Our powder's dry!"

I reckon Vandolen would have tried it, too, if Ed Evans hadn't got to him and grabbed his horse's reins.

"Better take cover, Mr. Vandolen." Evans advised him quietly. "Them jaspers mean business!"

But Vandolen wasn't the advice-taking kind. As Evans got aholt of his horse's reins to yank him back around, he jerked out his sixgun and let fly a volley of wild pistol shots off up the hill. Of course he didn't hit nothing but rocks, but it sure opened the ball. I reckon the only reason both him and the old man didn't take lead from the first two answering shots from up on the hill was because of the way Vandolen's horse was r'aring around.

One bullet caught the Thoroughbred square in the head and I heard another whine off a rock. Vandolen's horse dropped like a pole-axed steer. The way ol' Ed tumbled out of the saddle I thought for a jiffy he was hit, too. But he wasn't. He was just in a hurry to git close to the ground.

Barely peeking around my boulder, I let go a couple of quick shots at one of the puffs of gunsmoke. So did Sam. Not that we expected to hit anybody thataway; it was just to make 'em keep their heads down.

Ol' Ed's gray horse knowed what to do. He come on around behind my boulder *muy pronto* and stood crowded up as close against my pony as he could git. But Evans didn't come with him. He stayed to wrastle Vandolen out from under his shot horse. Spouting mixed Spanish and English cusswords, Hoolio crawled out to help him.

Meantime Sam and me het up our Winchester barrels keeping the horse-thieves pinned down the best we could. Shootin' from behind rocks at other fellers behind rocks is an awful good way to waste cartridges, but I reckon we done some good as discouragers, anyway.

Evans and Hoolio managed to git Vandolen back around behind Hoolio's boulder purty fast. Neither Vandolen or Hoolio was hit, but ol' Ed's right boot top had a bullet hole in it. He let Hoolio pull the boot off for him, then pulled up his pants leg, took a squint at a bloody streak on the calf of his leg, calmly wrapped a bandanna around it, and pulled his boot back on.

"It's all right, Tolly," he called to me without raising his voice any more than he had to. "I've been scratched worse by a housecat. What you figger now?"

"More help!" broke out Vandolen hoarsely. "Damn it, we got to go back for more help!"

"I always hate to leave a picnic before they pass the ice cream," I said. "*Cuantos son, Hoolio?*"

Hoolio held up his four-fingered hand again. "By count of the shoot-smokes, she's four. Maybe one was went on weeth the mares to rest heem on top of mesa."

"That's one apiece—an' Mr. Vandolen can referee," grinned Sam Purdy. "If we stick around awhile maybe mine'll do something foolish an' I can git on back to my egg suckin'!"

We stuck around, though not with much hopes of doing any good except to waste ammunition. We were kinder

like a sore-footed dog barkin' down a badger hole: he knows the badger's there but that's about all.

First Hoolio and Sam got our horses anchored as safe as possible in the bottom of the canyon, which wasn't so hard to do, considering all them big boulders we could keep between us and the horse thieves. Then, mostly crawling on our bellies, we spread out a little, each feller picking hisself a likely rock to lay behind.

Sam found him a place some sixty feet off to my right. Hoolio a little closer, and ol' Ed Evans crawled up on the slanting backside of a big boulder with sort of a gunsight split at the top. I taken my stand at the left flank nearest the canyon and kept Vandolen with me. Evans and Hoolio was within talking distance.

"I don't see any sense in this," Vandolen complained. "Why don't we go on back and climb the mesa someplace else? Maybe we could take these skunks in the rear, or at least locate my mares before they realize we're gone."

"You got good ideas," I told him, "but geography ruins 'em. First place, we can't pull out down the canyon without bein' seen—maybe out of gun range, but sighted just the same. Then by the time we'd ride twenty miles to the Walkin' M trail they'd have time to rest them sore-footed mares and shove 'em on into horse-thief country where they'd be mighty hard to find—even if our own nags wasn't too played out to foller 'em."

"Then we might as well give it up—before somebody gets killed!" Vandolen seemed to have lost most of his brash enthusiasm.

"That's a good idea, too," I shrugged. "But as long as the county furnishes cattridges, maybe we better use some of 'em. You never know which way a cornered wolf is goin' to jump."

Meantime the other boys and the horse thieves were already swapping a few shots—mostly at hats held up on a stick. It's a good enough way to locate the other feller's gun smoke, but that's about all it ever gets you a shot at.

After half an hour and about half a hundred shots we was still right where we'd started: quite a few holes in hats but nobody hit on either side as far as we could tell. It looked like a deadlock to me, and the way ol' Ed Evans risked showin' hisself every once in a while sorter had me worried. I sure didn't want to get the old man killed.

"Ed," I called to him, "I wish you'd remember you're the only man here with a sick wife expectin' him home tonight!"

"Tolly," he said, "I believe I've got one of 'em purty well located. Supposin' you slip your shirt on a juniper branch with your hat on top of it, an' sorter crawl around thataway, holdin' it up so it'll look like you're sneakin' towards a better shootin' position. Keep it movin', an' one of them jaspers is li'ble to show hisself, tryin' to git a shot at it. If he does I'll git him!"

I tried it just like he said, only I used Vandolen's shirt because it was a brighter color than mine. I never did see exactly what happened, but out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of ol' Ed suddenly raising up with his rifle, taking two quick shots, and dodging down again. The next second I was blinded for a jiffy by a puff of dust in my eyes from a bullet zinging off a rock not eight inches from my head. Another three or four ripped through Vandolen's shirt and one cut off the juniper branch I was carrying it on about a foot from my hand.

When I got back where I'd started, Sam Purdy was helping Vandolen bind up a bullet-busted arm on Hoolio. Up on his boulder Evans had calmly gone back to shooting about every two minutes just to let 'em know we still had cattridges.

"I think Ol' Ed whanged one of 'em," Sam Purdy told me.

"Me myself, I'm also make some shooting," shrugged Hoolio, "but I don't know if she heet notheeng!"

"I didn't have time to target him," said Evans up on his boulder. "I ain't fast enough findin' my sights like I used to be. You take my boy Eddie—if he'd been me he'd have *knowed* what he hit. I sure wisht he was here with us."

So did I—in a way.

"How's that arm feel, Hoolio?" I asked. "You want to sneak your horse out an' ride to a doctor?"

Hoolio gave me a look that would have withered green skunk cabbage. He said a four-letter English bad word with a Spanish accent, by which I reckoned he meant he aimed to stay with us.

"Well, we've drawed blood, boys," I said, "but we still ain't gittin' nowheres. I just been figgerin'—I believe I know a place, a piece up the canyon, where I can climb a tree and maybe swing over to the top of the first cliff rim. If I can make it that far, I can climb on up to the bench, sneak around it, and take them jaspers from the rear—pervided you boys will keep shootin' to hold their attention. I figger it'll take me about half an hour."

"We'll keep their attention, all right," said Sam Purdy, "but—"

"I know the tree you mean, Tolly," broke in Evans, starting to crawl down toward us off his rock. "By golly, I'll jest go with you! Or you stay an' let me—"

"Ed," I broke in, "excuse my sayin' so, but you're too damn old to go squirrelin' up any damn tree. You stay down here and help the boys keep 'em warmed up—an' don't go poppin' up any more like you done a few minutes ago, neither! Or ain't I bossin' this posse?"

"I reckon you're wearin' the star, Tolly," he agreed, sorter reluctant. "Only whyn't you take my shotgun? Nothin' like gazin' into two barrels loaded with buckshot to make a skunk fergit to squirt!"

"You got good ideas, Ed," I said. "I'll do it!"

"Hold on a minute, Mr. Tolliver." Vandolen pulled at my shirt sleeve plumb earnest. "I've been thinking about all this—let's give it up! I don't want to see any more men get hurt—or maybe killed—just on account of my horses!"

"It ain't just on account of your horses, Mr. Vandolen," I told him. "It's on account of the law."

I SNEAKED OFF UP THE narrow canyon to the left without being sighted, as far as I could tell, and climbed the big fir tree I had in mind without too much trouble, even with the shotgun to bother me. From way up toward the top of it I managed to swing my lass rope and snag it onto a stout-looking little juniper on top of the cliff at about the tenth try.

With the rim of the cliff some six feet below me, I taken a good holt on the rope and swang myself over. It bumped me purty hard, but I hung on till I'd sorter caught my wind, and by kickin' against the face of the cliff, finally managed to climb up the remaining

ten or twelve feet. After that it was nothing but a sneak job for a coyote, and no coyote ever snuck more cautious and careful than I did.

Every minute or two I could hear shootin', which sorter eased my mind—at least about the sneakin' up-on-'em part. It wasn't hardly a half hour after I'd left the other boys that I finally coyoted around the bench and crawled down the hill toward where them horse thieves was forted up. I snuck down to purt near within spittin' distance without ever being suspected. I heel-squatted there a jiffy, purty well hid behind a rock, to sorter size up the situation.

There was four of 'em, like Hoolio said. They was forted up in as neat a little pocket in the rocks as anybody could want. I had passed four saddle horses safely hid out back up on the bench, and had took time to move one of 'em off to himself. Tracks in the trail where I'd crossed it showed that one man had drove the loose stolen horses on up to the Mesa.

One young cowpoke was setting on the ground with his back against a rock, blood all over him, groaning every three or four breaths like he'd done lost all interest in outlaw warfare. Another one, just about as bloody, still had his Winchester poked through a crevice between two rocks. He let go a couple of shots just as I come in sight of 'em.

The other two looked purty shirt-tailed and sweaty, but no blood. They had their Winchesters poked out over a big flat-topped boulder through loopholes between rocks they had piled up on it. There was empty cattridge hulls scattered around, and the air smelled strong of gunsmoke.

"Hank," said one of the horse thieves, without turning his red-haired head, "we're runnin' purty damn low on cattridges. Give 'em a couple more rounds, an' we better be gittin' to hell outa here!"

Hank's answer was a string of cuss-words, including some unfavorable comment on a blankety-blank bunch of blankety-blank tender-footed Thoroughbreds that you couldn't even drive twenty miles without their blankety-blanked hoofs wearing down to the quick.

"Next time, by God," he wound up, "we better steal mules!"

I waited until Red stopped to reload, then leveled Ed Evans's loaded shotgun right down on 'em, cocked and ready to blow a hole through the first one that made a false move. Maybe that's what I should have done anyhow, but I was just too dang chicken-hearted to start blastin' 'em in the back without no warning. It just ain't an old Western custom, I reckon.

"All right, boys," I said, as calm as I knowed how. "I got you covered like a gravedigger's shovel! Which one of you wants to be dead?"

I reckon ol' Ed was right about the magic of a double-barreled shot gun at close range. Just about six seconds after I opened the discussion, six hands was up, including one each belonging to the two wounded hombres.

I told 'em to unbelt their short hardware and let it drop, and they done so. I told 'em to leave their long hardware where it was and bunch up over there by the wounded feller setting against the rock, and they done so. I told 'em to set down flat on the ground with their hands in their pockets, and they done so. It's a hard position to try and do anything quick from.

I started to holler to the boys down

below that I had 'em, then changed my mind.

"Well, Eddie," I said to the wounded cowboy setting against the rock, "how do you like horse stealin' by now?"

Eddie Evans didn't even look up at me.

"I've done got my belly full of it, Tolly," he groaned. "You reckon the ol' man knows I'm here?"

"I expect it was him that shot you," I said, "but I don't figger he saw who it was."

"Oh, God!" groaned Eddie. "I wish you'd shoot me, Tolly, an' hide my body so him and Ma won't never find out!"

"You got good ideas, Eddie," I told him. "But sorter late."

Then I turned to the others. "Boys," I said, "you're all three hooked for horse stealin' an' resistin' the law anyway. But I figger this is Eddie's first slip, an' he's got an honest ol' pappy an' a mighty sick ma that would rather see him dead than find out he's a thief. How about it?"

"Go ahead and shoot him," shrugged Red. "We'll help you hide the body—an' never let on we ever heard of him!"

"I ain't aimin' to shoot him," I said, "but listen: I've done moved his horse off away from yours, so it'll look like he wasn't with you. I want you to carry him off up the hill a piece and lay him where it'll look like he was crawlin' in on you when he got shot. I'll tell the ol' man that's how it was—an' I want you three to back me up, you savvy?"

"You go to hell!" said the black-haired Hank.

But the red-haired hombre was looking at me sorter funny.

"Of course I don't reckon any of you boys ever had a mother," I said.

For purt near half a minute none of 'em said anything. A couple more shots from off down the hill whined off the rocks. I heard Hoolio holler my name and knowed they'd be getting impatient to know the score, now that the shootin' had stopped.

"Jail don't last forever, boys," I said. "Bein' dead does!"

"Hell, Hank!" shrugged the red-haired cowpoke. "What have we got to lose?"

"Git me to a doctor," said the wounded one, "just git me to a doctor—an it's a deal!"

Less than five minutes later I hollered down the hill for my posse to come on up. Even with his shot leg, ol' Ed Evans came with 'em.

"Well, I see you got 'em, Tolly," he said.

"All but one that pulled out before I got here," I said. "Ed—I've got bad news for you. The Walkin' M boss had sent Eddie up the north trail to ride Ladrón Mesa for strays. He heard the shootin' from up on the Mesa an' snuck down on these jaspers from above while we was shootin' at 'em from below. He's layin' up the hill yonder purty bad shot."

"Yeah, the goddam meddler!" growled Red. "Why couldn't he mind his own damn business?"

"You was wishin' Eddie was here to help us, Ed," I said, "an' he sure 'nough was!"

"Goddam meddler!" growled the red-haired cowpoke again. "But I will say the kid's got guts!"

For a long moment old Ed Evans looked at me without saying anything—except maybe with his eyes.

"Eddie's a good boy, Tolly," he said finally, with never a quaver. "His ma'll be proud to hear he done his part. I'll go see how bad hurt he is."

THAT'S ALL.

I sent Hoolio and a right smart subdued Vandolen back with ol' Ed to take in the horse thieves—and Eddie—while me and Sam Purdy rode on after the stolen mares. Their hoofs all frazzled by the rocks like I'd figgered they would be, Ladrón Mesa was as far as the fifth horse thief had got with 'em. Evidently he'd watched from up on the rim and pulled out for safer country when he saw how the ruckus down on the boulder trail come out, not botherin' to try and take the stolen mares with him.

Maybe you think me and Sam didn't have us a time pushing them sore-footed Thoroughbreds back down that rocky trail and on to their home ranch. It took us till purt near daylight the next morning.

Eddie Evans was bad hurt, but he got well. As far as I know, he never did take to the wild bunch again. Whether or not ol' Ed Evans sure 'nough believed it had happened the way I told it, I plain don't know. If he didn't he never let on.

I never did have much use for horse thieves, but they're built two-legged, same as the rest of us—and I know of three that was man enough to go to jail—with their mouths shut about an old man's only son that'd happened to go wrong.

Answers to "Wild Willies of The West" quiz on page 39

1—F. Coyote is the West's champion howler.
2—D. Badgers dig more dens than anybody.
3—P. Skunks—aw, you already know that.
4—G. No Western critter has as long a tail as the lion.
5—J. Gray wolves pull down cattle by hamstringing them.
6—T. Bears are wintertime snoozers.
7—O. Pronghorns are noted for long-distance sight.
8—I. The rattlesnake's rattle is more like a buzz.
9—E. Jacks jump high with ease, also have fleas.
10—K. Prairie dogs dig deeper holes than any other critter.
11—C. Bobcats' tails are too short to grab.
12—S. Black rings around his tail.
13—B. Porcupines have about a million sharp quills.
14—A. Also called packrat. Said to leave something for every take.
15—R. The armadillo wears a shell but no hair.
16—H. Beavers, like lumberjacks, cut down trees.
17—M. Big ears give the mule deer his name.
18—L. These little squirrels are noisy little boogers.
19—N. Javelinas are a kind of wild pig.
20—Q. These squirrels live in the rocks instead of trees.

WAIT FOR THE WIND

By MARVIN DE VRIES

The whole town hated Pamplone, but who was going to stand against him? Doc Tattersall had it in his power to decide.

DOCTOR TATTERSALL held very few deep dislikes. If they came, he drove them off, or looked to himself once again, or made allowances in some way, and got rid of them. But, in the case of Pamplone, it wouldn't work. He wouldn't even try. I'd kill myself working at that, he thought.

This all came on because Pamplone happened to go past the window on his way to the Primrose, his busy boots making a clatter on the walk, his gun bright with mother-of-pearl, his eyes sweeping the town with cool arrogance and condescension.

Dr. Tattersall's face turned sour as a lemon drop. "If one man can make a parade," he remarked, "there it goes."

Old Hendricks chuckled. He was naked to the waist, and his ribs almost rattled against each other, he was so thin. "Quite a somebody," he agreed.

"A no-good popinjay," Dr. Tattersall muttered peevishly, and went back to his tapping and listening.

"I hear he bothered Ruthie Bent the other night," Hendricks said.

Dr. Tattersall lifted an earplug of his stethoscope. "What's that you say?"

Hendricks repeated the gossip. "Over at the dance the other night."

"What does that mean—bother?"

"Oh, just loose talk, I guess. But I hear Pell O'Mara's up in the air about it."

"That's right, she's Pell O'Mara's sweetheart, isn't she?"

"So they say."

"Somebody's going to shoot that fellow square in the nozzle some day," Dr. Tattersall predicted.

"I wouldn't be surprised. Go on, Doc. I want to get my shirt on. It's cold in here."

Dr. Tattersall listened and tapped again, but his eyes followed Pamplone to the Primrose, a disapproving look on his face. He wondered a little why Pamplone irked him so, and tried to settle on a reason, but it was hard to find one that matched his feeling. He was like a man who, as a matter of course, hates snakes. He could say he was young, with body grown, and needing a little time to let his head catch up, but it didn't fit. Pamplone had the smooth cunning of a cat. He had a callous thieving mind that held nothing beyond his reach. He had no youth to condone, but somewhere in his bones there was deadly mischief.

Pamplone stayed on the Primrose gallery a while carving at the upright. Dr. Tattersall had gone past the place and noticed he was putting his name in the wood, a very fancy project that was going to take some time. "Where does that loafer get his livelihood?" he muttered.

"I never asked him," Hendricks said with a small chuckle to show he considered it a very touchy subject. "Come on, Doc. Don't fritter my time away."

"Your time," Dr. Tattersall scoffed. "All you do is loaf all day."

"Well, that takes time."

A rider in a big rush came in from the west, and Dr. Tattersall looked up again. He recognized him before he got off the slant of the hill. His name was Jim Meldrum. He had a small ranch on Drowned Man Creek.

Pamplone on the Primrose gallery stopped his carving and leaned a shoulder against the upright, watching too. He wasn't too far away for Dr. Tattersall to see the impudent look on his face. Meldrum paid no attention when he went past, but Dr. Tattersall got the impression that a feeling ran between them. Pamplone's impudence measured it from that direction. Meldrum didn't look, but he seemed intensely aware of the man standing on the gallery, somehow, and immense resolve not to look stood on his face, and Dr. Tattersall thought well, well, well.

"Boy, is he in a lather," Hendricks remarked.

"Yes, they're expecting, you know."

"So I heard. Took him a long time, didn't it?"

"Oh, go on, you old goat," Dr. Tattersall said, and handed him his shirt and pushed him out.

Meldrum came in while Hendricks was going out. He was a serious, middle-aged man, a little sulky at his lot, perhaps, or looking so at least, but he was thrifty and industrious, and generally respected by the community. Understandable anxiety rode him now, and Dr. Tattersall tried to reassure him, but the tense look didn't go away. It even seemed as though he hardly heard what was being said, an odd response from a man who might be expected to grab at straws at such a time.

"All right," Dr. Tattersall told him, "You go back and set some water on to boil. Lot of it. I'll be along in no time. Don't blow your top."

Meldrum hurried away, but Dr. Tattersall took his time. This was Mel-

drum's first experience of this nature, and of course he would be hours too early with his alarums. There was no need for haste. He ate a small mid-morning snack the squaw had ready for him to fortify himself against the trip, then picked up his satchel and walked to the livery-barn where he kept his rig.

Arch, the hostler, usually saw him come, but not this time. Dr. Tattersall heard him talking to someone in the tackroom and called him out. Arch came out in a big fluster, still throwing words behind him. He said Pell O'Mara was in there getting set to match a gunfight with Dude Pamplone.

"A gunfight," Dr. Tattersall echoed. "I heard there was some trouble, something about Ruthie, but I didn't know it was that serious."

"It's serious all right. He'll get his head shot off."

"Well, get my horse hitched, Arch. I've got to go. Wish him luck for me."

"Won't you go in, Doc, and try to talk him out of it, while I'm hitchin'? He thinks a lot of you."

Dr. Tattersall considered it a moment, then stepped inside. As well as he could recall, Pell O'Mara was twenty years old. He had him in a little tally book back in his office, with a name and date, but he couldn't remember exactly when he had been born. Gradually, they all retreated out of his memory, but he did remember he had been puny that day, and he was rugged now, rugged and raging. He had many friends, and some of them were there trying to argue him out of what they called plain suicide, but he wouldn't listen.

"I sent him word at the Primrose to come out into the street," he explained, as if he were doing it for the hundredth time, "and he sends back word he'll come out when he sees me come out, and that's what I aim to do right now." He looked straight at Dr. Tattersall while he talked, but he hardly seemed to see him.

Arch came back into the room. "Can't you do something, Doc?" he pleaded, as if Pell weren't there to hear. "He can't stand up to Pamplone."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Pell himself answered. "I can handle a gun."

"Once you get started, maybe, but you're too slow."

"You don't know. You never saw me at my best. Hello, Doc."

"Hello, Pell," Dr. Tattersall answered. "Where's Peabody?" Peabody was the local deputy.

Arch said he was out on a complaint. "He's been gone two days."

"That's why I picked today," Pell said, coolly. "I knew Peabody was gone." He looked up at Dr. Tattersall again and added, "Ruthie's not the first girl to complain about Pamplone, you know that. They all do. They're not all my territory, of course, but Ruthie is."

"What did Pamplone say?"

"I wouldn't repeat it."

"Oh, go on, that won't hurt you. It ought to be measured against what you're going to do."

"I measured it. It had to do with her figure. They were indecent remarks."

"Were they spoken to her?"

"They were."

"And then she complained to you?"

"No. Somebody else heard 'em and told me."

"Then you don't know if she feels insulted?"

"That makes no difference. It's what was intended, not what she feels, that counts. Anyway, I know an insult when I hear one."

"Have you stopped to think your

head might be the one to roll? How would Ruthie like that?"

"That's about all anybody around here can think of." He sounded exasperated with their concern, but glad, too, for their close friendship, his frank open face showing his regard for all of them. However, he wouldn't allow himsel to be swayed by their concern, and his next words came from a stubborn core inside of him they couldn't touch. "It makes no difference. It's a chance I've got to take. He could be Wyatt Earp or anybody, I'd still have to go ahead."

"Where's Ruthie's father?" Dr. Tattersall asked.

"It's not his mix. She's bespoken to me."

"Oh, I didn't know you were that far along. I don't keep up with half the talk."

"Besides, if he tried to use a gun he'd shoot himself in the face."

"Goda'mighty," Arch breathed, and walked a circle around the room. Stopping at Dr. Tattersall's elbow, he said, privately, "I sent for Ruthie. She ought to be here any minute."

"Armed?" Dr. Tattersall asked, but he couldn't pull even the shadow of a grin out of Arch. They walked away together onto the barn runway. "You better get him cooled off, somehow, Arch."

"I don't know how. To tell the truth, if I knew he could make it, I'd let him go ahead. Pamplone's always up to something like that, even with my girl, and you know she's not so pretty."

"Oh, come, she's pretty as a picture. Tell her I said so. Tell her on your own account, too. It'll make her pretty."

"Oh, quit, Doc."

"Anyway, I don't see Pell going out there very fast, do you? Maybe It'll blow over with talk."

"No, it won't blow over. With anybody else it might, but not with him. He can't back out and keep his face." He let out a long weary breath. "If only Peabody'd get back. He'd put a stop to it."

"Is Pell as good as he claims with a gun?"

"I've seen him shoot a snake square in the eye at fifty feet."

"That's pretty good, but he's apt to go to pieces on a man. It's not the same thing by a long ways."

"It just about is here," Arch mumbled.

Ruthie arrived on a lathered horse, and they all went into the tackroom again. Dr. Tattersall gaped helplessly as she and Pell came together with their young urgencies and their ancient woes. Pell said she shouldn't have come and tried to look angry, but her concern for him gave him a delight he couldn't hide. Tears touched her eyes and went away. They came again, and Pell used his neckpiece on them. She caught hold of his sleeve and clung to it, and he tried to pull away; there was a flareup of anger, and sudden repentance, all like weeds tumbling over each other, like young saplings, Dr. Tattersall thought, struggling with their first wild wind, reaching for each other with hands and words and hearts, clutching for something to steady themselves.

"Goda'mighty," Arch breathed, "what'd I do?" He gaped harder than Dr. Tattersall, as though this was a depth he had never seen, at least never come to in his own cool love. He got down to business, finally, however, and put the right words in her mouth, so that she said Pamplone had never spoken to her in an insulting manner. She tried her best, but it was easy to tell it wasn't true. Even Pell knew it. He wouldn't

contradict her directly, but he said Pamplone had bragged about it at the Primrose, and that was just as bad as actually to have said it.

"I won't let you do anything," Ruthie stormed. "Promise me you won't, Pell. Promise me."

No, Dr. Tattersall thought, that won't do either. It's all right for now, but it won't wear, not here where folks look at things the way they do. It's got to be Pobadey, and he's got to use his office to put a stop to it. Aloud, he said impatiently, "Arch, my horse."

"Sure, Doc, I'm trying to." Arch went out, looking over his shoulder.

Pell was trying to find an answer for Ruthie that would suit both of them, and making very hard work of it. "I promise I'll think about it," he said, finally, and then made a helpless gesture with his hands.' 'Ye Gods, nobody wants me to do this, and, if I didn't, tomorrow everybody'll say I got cold feet."

"Oh, no," Dr. Tattersall said, trying to make it sound convincing. "Most everybody around here's got good sense."

"I don't reckon it's a matter of sense, Doc," Pell said. "It's a feeling."

"All right, all right," Dr. Tattersall grumbled. "Ruthie, you go up to my house and rest a while. Tell the squaw I sent you. Things'll work out, somehow. If they need you here, they'll call you. Isn't that right, Pell?"

Pell nodded quickly and pushed her along toward the door. "You do what Doc says," he told her, and looked at one of his friends to get up and take her away.

When she was gone they all breathed a little more freely, but still no one knew what to do. Dr. Tattersall realized they all faced the same dilemma. Pell rightly had a chip on his shoulder. Pamplone's offense wasn't trifling, but it wasn't world-shaking, and there was a question whether a man ought to risk his life to avenge such an affront. Yes, he ought to if it happened far away to a man no one knew, but this was a friend whose body was to be whipped and torn to shreds by flying lead. With a peevish frown, Dr. Tattersall followed Arch outside and got into his rig.

"You ought to stay, Doc."

"I can't. I've got to go to the Meldrums. You know what's going on over there."

"Yeah, I know, but somebody's going to get shot right here. If it turns out to be Pamplone, that's all right, but it might be Pell, and you might be able to do something for him."

"If they get started, Arch, they're going to keep on till someone's dead."

"Yeah, but one of 'em might get hit and still live. If it's Pell, you could do something."

"That's my business, Arch. After it gets that far, I'd do as much for one as for the other." He thought a moment. "That's an idea, Arch. Tell Pell to wait till I get back. It's in his hands when it's to start, and you tell him it's out of order not to have a doctor around. This is a duel, and it isn't according to Hoyle unless they have a doctor on hand. It wouldn't count." His lips twisted in a mirthless grin.

Arch liked the sound of it. He said he would try it out, and he even sounded a little hopeful that it would work. "He might listen to that, since it's just time he'd be letting go. And maybe Peabody'll get back before the shooting starts."

"That's what I'm hoping. Anyway, I'll be at the Meldrums."

On the way, he tried to clear his mind of the turmoil he had left behind, but it

always came back. In a confused groping way, Pell O'Mara was right. Lofty notions drifted on the wind, and a man who didn't listen to their cajolings lost something he could never win back. Somewhere, a stand must be made. Perhaps Pell was gagging at too thin a smoke, but Dr. Tattersall knew Pamplone, and he knew flame would come unless the black smoulder was quenched beforetime. Old lore knew these things and had long since lifted its hand against them. "Ye Gods," he breathed, and tried to throw it off again.

The Meldrums lived in a one-room log house in a grove of cottonwoods. A thin infant cry reached Dr. Tattersall before he opened the door, and he knew he was late. Meldrum came out, his face gray, his eyes drawn away to some far place. "Usually, they ask me," Dr. Tattersall remarked, "but now I've got to ask. Is it a boy or a girl?"

"A boy," Meldrum answered. His voice shook a little. He didn't raise his eyes, and he didn't complain about the tardiness that had left him in the lurch, but a black mood possessed him, and he was a thousand miles away.

"Nothing wrong, I hope," Dr. Tattersall said.

Meldrum shook his head. "Go right in. Nakko Nel's there with her potions. I told her to keep her hands off." With his free hand he motioned toward the door. He was holding some bulky object under his jacket with his other hand. He gave it a quick hoist as though it was heavy to hold and went on to the barn.

Nakko Nel, an Indian woman who always came to birthings, sat in a dark corner fuming. Some of her magic lay in her lap, and she fingered it furtively and mumbled a singsong, as though, even at a distance, she could accomplish what she had come for. She didn't like Dr. Tattersall and wouldn't speak to him.

"Seems as though there's nothing much left for me to do," Dr. Tattersall told Mrs. Meldrum. "He's a nice-looking boy."

Mrs Meldrum didn't answer. She was a handsome woman, even in her disarray, but she was in some black pit of dismay equal to her husband's, and her eyes showed it. "Did you see Jim?" she asked.

"Yes, he went on to the barn."

"Did he have the gun?"

Dr. Tattersall walked around the foot of the bed watching her, his eyes squinting with perlexity and concern. "Why, I don't know. I didn't see a gun." But he knew he had. Meldrum had been holding it under his jacket. "What would he want with a gun?"

Mrs Meldrum's long thin fingers clutched and clawed at the cover. Vague fillips of hysteria nipped at her face. She flung out a hand pointing at a corner bracket. "It was up there. It's gone now. Talk to him, Doctor. You must talk to him."

"Surely," Dr. Tattersall said quietly, soothingly, "but I'd better see to things here first." He rolled up his sleeves and lifted the baby out of the crib and unwrapped it and looked to the tying. "That's all right," he said, especially for Nakko Nel's benefit, and when she heard it she picked up her belongings and went outside. She had an old pinto pony out there at the hitching post that sprouted gunnysacks, gourds, and hide pouches on all sides. She stored her charms and fetishes in these and led the animal away.

"Nobody asked her to come," Mrs. Meldrum said by way of apology for having her.

"She has a way of knowing the time and all," Dr. Tattersall said. "I don't know how. I would pay her a little something." He took his breath again, and asked, "What am I to see Jim about?"

Mrs. Meldrum began to sob, a dry racking whimper that shook her body, but brought no tears. "He's going gunning for the man who fathered that boy."

Dr. Tattersall winced, and still he wasn't greatly surprised. What he had seen on the Primrose steps that morning had somehow forewarned him. He had great forbearance for human folly and weakness, and he had found it often in strange unexpected places, but he knew that was not what had come here. It was violence and outrage, dragging along its soiled tatters of ruin and dismay.

He kept his hands busy, letting the helter-skelter of her mind come out the way it would. Pamplone's name was spoken, and it settled on Dr. Tattersall's awareness without shock, as though he already had a place made for it. Broken words and long silences filled her mouth. The brooding fear of being left alone while ruffians roamed about was a loose thread to it all that she tried to push into the warp of her talk, almost as though she thought it had made a fear-scent to bring one to her door.

She spoke Pamplone's name again and choked on it. ". . . We thought we ought to tell it out and take the shame, but it is more to face than anyone knows. We let it go past day by day, and made our little thoughts pass it by, trying not to look at it again, trying to say we could live better with it held between the two of us than any other way. Later, when we knew what was to happen, we had to look at it again, and we found that we could say he would be ours. Jim said so, too, and held nothing back. But he can't say it now. I saw him turn away from the boy and he won't come back to him, not while Pamplone lives. And I see, too, it's more than anyone could ask."

Dr. Tattersall chewed his lip. "I don't know what to say," he said, finally, "but I'll speak to him. I think I'll go do it now." He was sometimes a source of surprise to himself. To become a father confessor to a whole community was something he hadn't bargained for when he took his Hippocratic Oath, but it had fallen into place beside his calomel and carbolated vaseline, and it often did more good than anything he could find in the pharmacopoeia. The spirit and body came together in so many ways, attention to one often brought health to the other, and he had come to scorn no devices to that end, not even Nakko Nel's snake eyes and dried-out gizzards and stinky sump water. Nor even his own humble words and thoughts.

He stepped into the mellow gloom of the barn and looked around. The big weapon Meldrum had been so secretive about was in a vise on the workbench. Meldrum was scraping off rust with a file. He tried to hide the gun behind him when he saw Dr. Tattersall coming toward him, but the doctor was through with small deceits. He gave the weapon a rap with his fingernail as though he could have made it crumple under his touch. "Out of whack. Not used in years. You don't know whether the damned thing will go off when you pull the trigger, or whether it'll blow up in your face. But you're going gunning, yes, sir."

"So I am," Meldrum said gravely, accepting the fact that Dr. Tattersall knew what he was going to do and the reason why, but quarreling with it a little in his mind.

"You're going to get yourself killed, you know that? No doubt of it at all."

"That's a chance I got to take."

Dr. Tattersall had heard the words before. Pell O'Mara, with more chance than Meldrum had, had spoken them with the same stubborn conviction. He was tired of hearing them. "Don't be silly. There's no chance in it for you."

"Maybe not." Meldrum's lips squeezed tight with defiance, then suddenly loosened again and his voice turned softer. "I mean to make the boy my own. I've set myself to do that, but now I see I can't so long as there's this man betwixt us. There's no use giving the boy my hand if I can't give him my heart."

Dr. Tattersall wanted to weep. "It might come with waiting," he said. He considered telling Meldrum what was going on in town, but kept it back. If it had been called off, it wouldn't help Meldrum any, and if it hadn't, Pamplone was most apt to be the one who had survived. "Suppose you went through with this and even made it stick, especially if you made it stick, the reason for it all is bound to come out. You've got to think about that."

"That will have to be so then. In some ways, it's not right to keep it quiet, anyhow not if he is to go on living."

"That's true," Dr. Tattersall agreed. "Does Nakko Nel know about it?"

Meldrum shook his head. "I wouldn't know how. There was nothing spoken that might give her an idea." He assumed that, as between the two of them here, the secret was entirely safe, and it gave Dr. Tattersall a small glow to see how much trust they put in him.

He pointed a scoffing finger at the weapon again. "Do you think you can get that thing in shape?"

"It's rusted to hell and gone. That's mostly it, but I don't see why I can't get it off. A little oil and so on."

"It'll take you the rest of the day."

"I expect."

"Got ammunition?" He hardly knew whether he hoped "No" or "Yes".

"I got ammunition."

"Then I s'pose there's nothing more to say."

"No, Doc, nothing."

Dr. Tattersall drove a dappled gray that loved that livery barn and never needed any prompting on the way home. From habit, he held the whip in his hand, letting it drag along the wayside weeds. He put one foot on the dashboard, the other hung outside on the step. His thoughts drifted back and forth between what was behind him at the Meldrums and what was ahead, and he began to consider whether he could somehow bring the two together.

If I had my say, Dr. Tattersall thought, I'd push it on to Pell, but, thank Heaven, it's not in my hands. No, no. No man stirred up a wind like that, or tried to say which way it should blow. Let it go in its own way and time, like a soaring bird with only its own whim and wings to send it on. With a shake of his head, and a bleak look at some far-off nothing, he put the whip in the socket and pulled his leg inside the box.

The town lay in a hollow among the Echo Hills, like a ragged tear in a piece of cloth. Peabody, the deputy, always kept a horse handy at the hitchrack in front of the lockup when he was in town, but there was none there now. Evidently, he hadn't returned, but, still, no corpses littered the street. Maybe the advice Dr. Tattersall had given Arch, to urge Pell to wait for him to get back, had worked, although Dr. Tattersall had had very little faith in it at the

time. Possibly, Arch had roped and hogtied him.

Dr. Tattersall drove up to the barn, and Arch came out, looking relieved. "We've just about got 'er made," he reported. "It's still a little up in the air, but he's sitting quiet and thinking, and the right word from you will finish it up. I'm sure."

"How did you do it?"

"We got Ruthie after him again, for one thing. She's gone home now. It looks that good. And we talked at him all day. Theoretically, he's still waiting for you. It still sticks in his craw, but—"

"Pride," Dr. Tattersall said. "That's the one thing. You know that as well as I do. I s'pose Pamplone's still at the Primrose."

"Yeah, he is."

"A day over there hadn't ought to do him much good."

"The last I heard he's still sober."

"No Peabody, eh?"

"No. We found out he's at the Cross O Z, and I sent for him on the sly, but he hasn't showed up. He ought to be here soon."

Dr. Tattersall went into the tackroom. The same group, only one less, was still there. Pell O'Mara sat on a bag of oats, his hands folded between his legs. Streaks of sunlight touched his boots and climbed the wall. The day was going, and Dr. Tattersall saw an advantage in it for Pell, putting the sun at his back, if, for some reason, he still meant to make his try.

Pell's face was still flushed with the bickering of his thoughts, his eyes a little resentful at the hard conflict that had beaten around him all day long. To Dr. Tattersall, it didn't look as definitely resolved as Arch made out. Pell's pride still had to go. Perhaps, it could be lulled through the rest of the day by more talk, but it was still there It was there in the look he gave Dr. Tattersall, the sharp questing look of a man desperately anxious to learn how much he lost if he gave way to his friends. It was a wary look, trying to catch the truth by surprise in another's eyes.

Dr. Tattersall saw it all, and he saw how easily he could send Pell out there to face Pamplone's gun, and perhaps to go down in the dust and never get up, so that another man with more reason, but no skill, need not do the same.

"We waited for you, Doc," Pell said with the shadow of a smile. "We wanted Pamplone to have the best of everything."

"That's kindly," Dr. Tattersall said. "He ought to appreciate it."

Arch, with harness in his hands, looked in to see how it was going, to hear the words that would fetter Pell's hands for good. By the look on his face, he wanted to hear it now, but Dr. Tattersall had trouble with it. He took a quick trip back to Meldrum's barn and heard the rasp of the file and saw the rust motes scatter under Meldrum's breath, and felt again, like a fist in his stomach, the depth of Meldrum's need and the pitiful poverty of his strength. There was a long silence, measured by the shadow on the wall.

Dr. Tattersall broke it at last, with words that hit them like stones. "At any rate, I'm back," he said, "so you can get at it now." He pointed at the streak of sun. "You have the best of that. With a little luck, maybe you can make a go of it. Or are you waiting for something else?"

There was taunt in the question, and it stung Pell to the bone. He got to his feet and took a step forward. "What else, Doc?" His voice was sharp with challenge and growing resentment.

Dr. Tattersall took another breath. His eyes raked Pell from head to foot with cool appraisal. A knowing smile touched his face. "It takes some men a long time to get up their nerve," he stated. "Pamplone's a good shot, and Peabody ought to be here pretty soon."

The words brought a shocked silence, and Dr. Tattersall walked out leaving it behind. He went up the street to his house, stopping a moment on the porch to look for Peabody, but the Echo Hills were still empty. He went inside and put his satchel away. The squaw rattled dishes, her usual way of summoning him, and he was sitting down to the meal when he heard the shot, several shots that rattled through the town in quick succession, and left a cringing silence behind.

Dr. Tattersall stayed at the table swallowing food he couldn't taste, and let the squaw answer the pounding at the door when it came. One dead then, from the talk he heard, and the other tattered flesh and shattered bone, but he didn't know which was which. It didn't matter to him when they came to him like this. Here the same wind he had thought about on the way home blew, but he was free to balk it if he could, called upon indeed to use the last of his day's strength to hold it back. It touched him in no way, except his pride, how it went, good or bad, but when it was finished he leaned against the wall and got his breath and nodded to those around him.

Old Hendricks was there and said it was a fair fight. "But I hope it's the last I ever see. 'Tain't as if it amounted to enough."

"These things hardly ever do," Dr. Tattersall said. When the wounded man opened an eye and looked around, he added, "You'll be all right, Pell."

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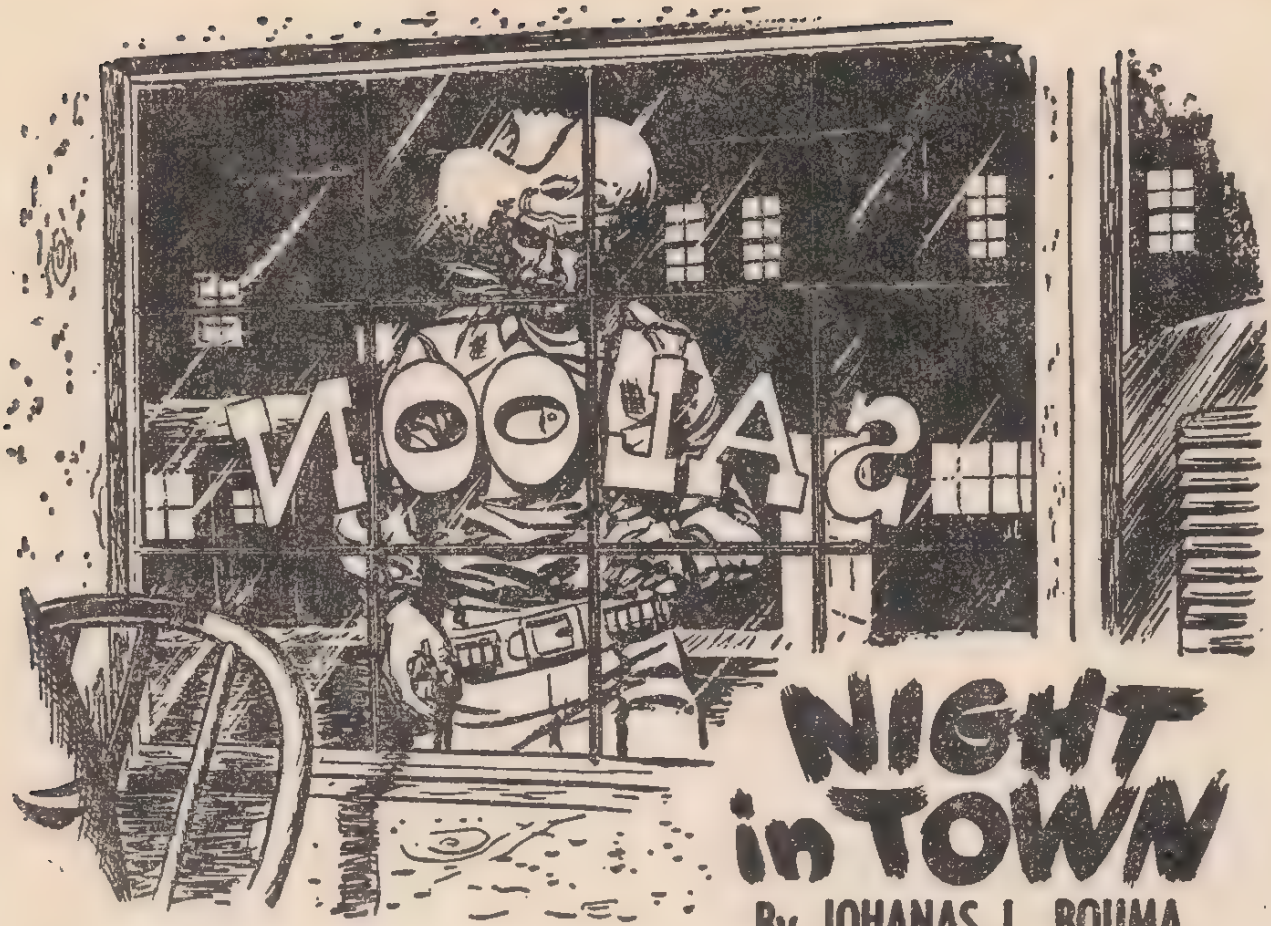


NIGHT in TOWN

By JOHANAS L. BOUMA

With Lew Reed back in town it looked like trouble for sure for Frank Stanton. He couldn't very well let another man run him out of town the night before his wedding.

"YOU WANT TO SEE ME, JACK?" Frank Stanton asked, as he entered the marshal's office.

"Sit down," Marshal Obert said gruffly. "There's something you ought to know, seeing as how you're getting married in the morning." He looked at Frank with his pale, moist eyes. "Lew's on his way here."

"Lew Reed? What about it?"

"You ought to know," the marshal said gruffly. "Rusty Rose and Dan Kay are with him. Jones, one of Drucker's riders, saw them in the hills. Said they'd likely be here in an hour or so."

"Why should Jones bother to tell you that?"

"Man, use your head! Lew was courting Nora right up to when he left town last month."

"Not from Nora's side of the fence, he wasn't."

"That may be so. But he left with the idea of coming back for her; a lot of folks will vouch for that. Then you meet her while he's gone, and make up your mind just like that. Lew is gonna be one mad coyote when he finds out."

"We've been friends since I used to ride for his father."

"Sure, but Lew ain't the man he was then," the marshal said in his gruff old voice. "How long since you seen him?"

"Saw him last fall, but he didn't have much to say. Heard he'd had trouble with his father, and was riding for Ladder."

"Well, Talley fired him. Spent his

time in town after that, raising hell. That was before Nora came to visit her aunt. He tried to get work after he met her, but nobody would hire him, so he and Rusty and Kay cleared out."

"Lew won't make trouble."

"Will when he finds out what happened while his back was turned."

"You think I crossed him behind his back?" Frank asked softly.

"No. But he'll think it. You just don't know how much he's changed since he walked out on Joel. You stick up at that ranch of yours, and don't come to town more'n three-four times a year. Hell, Lew'd get drunk here and pick fights for no reason at all. Plumb loco."

"What kind of wrangle did he have with Joel to change him?"

"Damned if I know."

"Well, don't worry about it," Frank said, getting up.

"If I was you I'd get out of town," the marshal said, looking at Frank with his troubled old eyes. "Let Nora talk to him."

"That all you got to say?"

"Oh, hell, folks never listen to sense," the marshal said gruffly. Frank shrugged and walked out of the office.

He angled across the street toward the hotel where Nora and her Aunt Emma awaited him on the veranda.

"What did the marshal have to say?" Nora asked him.

"Wanted to warn me about married life," Frank grinned. "You two going to the minister's house now?"

"Yes," Nora said, and laughed. "Not you, though. We'll not see each other again until tomorrow at church."

"Don't forget to get a haircut, Frank," Aunt Emma said.

"I won't."

"Come along, Nora. We're late as it is."

"All right." Nora smiled at Frank. "I can still hardly believe that I came West to visit, and that now I'm staying for good."

"It did happen pretty fast, didn't it?"

"Well, I never did think I'd like a long engagement," she laughed, and Frank leaned over and kissed her on the mouth.

"That'll have to last till tomorrow."

"Don't be kissing in public," Aunt Emma said sharply.

Nora laughed again and lifted her skirts a little, going down the steps. As Frank watched them going along the walk, he saw two riders pull up, and he recognized Joel Reed and Al Yonkers, Joel's foreman. Nora stopped and spoke to the cattleman, who removed his hat with old world courtesy, his white hair plain to see in the gathering dusk. Then the women moved on and Frank turned right toward the barber shop, wondering what had happened between Joel and his son.

Bevan had lowered his shades and had his CLOSED sign in the window. Frank rattled the door and Bevan, grumbling, opened up. Drucker and Jones waited on the bench, and Ed Crane, his face lathered, sat in the barber chair. Frank hung his hat and took off his coat, saying cheerfully, "You ought to hire another barber, Bevan."

"Be all right if all you fellers didn't wait till Sat'day night to get your barbering done," Bevan said, stropping his razor.

"Big day tomorrow, eh, Frank?" Ed Crane said. Crane was Marshal Obert's deputy, and he took the town over at midnight. He grinned at Frank with his reckless young eyes.

"Sure will be."

"Big night coming up, too," Jones said, eyeing Frank with a pleased little smile. "You see Obert?"

"I saw him."

Drucker said, "You on the town tonight, Frank?"

"I reckon so."

"Stop by Hogan's later on," the cattleman said, "and I'll set you up to a drink of his best."

"His best ain't none too good," Jones said, still looking at Frank with his pleased little smile. "But I guess you'll have need for a stiff shot tonight, eh?"

"Go to hell," Frank said. "You talk too much."

Jones laughed. "No use getting upset. You and Lew are friends, ain't that right?"

"What about Lew?" Ed Crane said.

"He's on his way here," Jones grinned. "That worry you too, Ed?"

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Nothing special," Jones grinned. "But you know how he's been here lately, raising hell all the time."

"I can handle him."

"Sure. You got the reputation for handling toughs, and you got to keep it. Can't tell what'll happen, though. Good thing Frank here ain't packed a gun since he shot that feller in Hogan's place."

"Don't talk around me," Frank said angrily.

"Talk as I damn please," Jones grinned. "It's true, ain't it? Can't no man get away from the truth. And Lew ain't gonna like it when he finds out you're marrying—"

"Shut up and get out of here."

"All I was saying—"

"You want to get thrown out?"

A little uneasiness stirred in the puncher's eyes. He cleared his throat and said, "Hell, Frank, I was just saying—"

"I said out, damn you!" Frank grabbed Jones by the scruff of the neck with one hand, jerked the door open with the other, swung a boot and sent Jones flying across the walk. He slammed the door shut and sat down, his eyes raging.

"Had it coming," Ed Crane said. "Damned old woman. Drucker, is he the best you can do for a rider?"

"He don't know it yet, but he ain't riding for me no more," the cattleman said. "Frank, that's the first time I seen you riled for a good long time. You think Lew'll show?"

"What if he does?"

"Lew's a changed man since his trouble with Joel."

"So I heard."

"Don't make sense. Joel runs the biggest ranch this part of the country. Came here with cash to spare. Started big and stayed big. Him and Lew always got along, too. Then all at once there early last fall Lew up and leaves the ranch. Never would say why."

"Joel take it hard?"

"Plenty hard," Drucker said. "Never saw a man age so in so short a time."

"Next," Bevan said, and the cattleman got up and sat down in the barber chair.

Ed Crane grinned at Frank as he buckled on his gunbelt. Then he went out.

It was dark by the time Frank stepped from the shop. As he started up the street, a voice hailed him, and he recognized Petersen, the minister.

"Frank, I have to talk to you."

They moved slowly along the walk. and finally the minister said, "What are you going to do about Lew coming here?"

"Forget it," Frank said. "I worked alongside Lew five years, and we never had a cross word."

"That was a long time ago, Frank. Your trails have parted since then. You settled down and started your own spread after that shooting scrape with Teal—"

"About time, too. I was a whoop and a holler from hell in those days."

"That's true," the minister said. "But you put away your gun and buckled down to work."

"What's that got to do with Lew coming back?"

"I've heard here lately that he resents the fact that you've made a go of your ranch."

"Why, man, that's plain silly. Lew helped me out there when I first got started."

"I know it," the minister said impatiently. "But that was long before he had trouble with his father. Since then he's resented you, and don't ask me why. Just don't make the mistake of considering him your friend."

They walked on past the last scattered buildings toward Jameson's stable, where lamplight spread out from the big open doors.

The minister stopped at the side of the stable and stood with his hands clasped at his back. "I want you to do me a favor, Frank. Get out of town. Ride to your ranch—"

"Nothing doing."

"Then do it for Nora's sake," the minister urged. "You must remember that she has no inkling of the trouble that may explode if you and Lew meet. She thinks of Lew as a friend. He took her to dances and socials—"

"I know that," Frank said. "I don't know where he ever got the idea that she'd have him, though."

"I expect he made up his mind about her, and that was that."

"Then why'd he go away?"

"Who knows? Did Nora tell you that he told her he'd be back?"

"Sure. But he didn't speak to her of marriage. Not that it made any difference, because she didn't feel that way about him."

The sound of hoofs reached them, and the minister looked past the corner of the stable. He drew back quickly, gripped Frank's elbow and urged him into deeper shadows.

"They're here now. We'll wait until they've gone into town."

"Look here—" Frank began angrily.

"Do as I ask," the minister whispered urgently, still gripping Frank's elbow. "Give them a chance to get into town and then go to your room and stay there. Please, Frank—"

They heard the creaking of leather as the men dismounted in the stable. A moment later they heard the voices and footsteps of the men, then saw them walking toward town.

"What the hell we have to come back here for?" Rusty Rose was saying in a sullen voice. He carried bulky saddlebags across his left shoulder.

"I told you I wanted to talk to her, didn't I?" Lew said, and then the three men passed out of earshot.

"Well, you satisfied?" Frank said angrily, jerking his arm from the minister's grip.

"They're turning into the Casino," the minister said, his voice full of relief. "Lew won't have time for one drink before he hears about the wedding. Someone will tell him."

"That's too damn bad," Frank said, heading for town with long strides.

Two men came toward them as they approached the hotel. They were Joel Reed and Al Yonkers.

"Well, Frank," Joel said, and stopped. "Come inside, and I'll buy you a drink. You too, Petersen."

"Not tonight, thanks. You men go ahead. Frank, remember what I said, will you?" The minister looked anxiously at Frank, then hurried away.

"Odd folks, ministers," Joel Reed said absently. "Come along, Frank." He went up the steps and across the veranda and the lobby, turning left into the ornate hotel bar. Men looked up as they entered and approached the bar.

Joel nodded curtly at the barkeep. "Your best." He turned to Frank, a set smile on his hard old face. "Don't do much drinking these days, but a wedding calls for a jolt."

He touched Frank's glass with his own. "Here's luck. You're marrying a mighty fine girl."

"Thanks, Joel."

"Them's my sentiments," Al Yonkers said, and they downed their drinks.

Someone entered the bar and spoke softly and rapidly to half a dozen men at a corner table, and Frank noticed them all looking his way. He stared back at them and they averted their eyes.

"You two coming to the wedding?" he asked.

"Sure," the old cattleman said. "Have another, Frank."

"Thanks, but I promised Drucker to stop by at Hogan's, and I can't take too much of this stuff."

The bartender came up. "Hear Lew's in town, Mr. Reed."

Joel Reed grunted. Al Yonkers glared at the bartender, who turned hurriedly away as if to wait on a customer he'd forgotten to serve.

Yonkers said, "We going back to the ranch tonight?"

"No. Get us a room, Al. We'll stay in town."

"Thanks for the drink, Joel," Frank said, watching Yonkers enter the lobby.

The old cattleman nodded, looking steadily at Frank with his flinty eyes. "You might have some trouble with that boy, Frank. Be better if you stay out of his way."

"You know I can't go out of my way to stay out of his."

"I guess not." The old cattleman shook his white head slowly. "I just don't know," he said in a distant voice. "Frank, don't ever think a man doesn't pay for the wrongs he does in this life. Sooner or later it comes back at him, and he pays."

"What is it, Joel?"

"Nothing that'd interest you," the old man said, the set smile back on his face.

Frank left him filling his glass, meeting up with Yonkers in the lobby. "Lew's taking on a load," the foreman said. "Better watch out for him."

"What changed him, Al? What's his trouble with Joel?"

"Not your business," Yonkers said, wooden-faced.

"Sorry. But you been with Joel since he started ranching, and you've known Lew all his life. The four of us worked together for a good many years, and I'd like to help if I can."

"Forget it," Yonkers said.

"That's an idea," Frank said.

He went out and walked along the street to Hogan's. The place was pretty full, men crowding the bar and playing cards at the back tables. Drucker stood talking with a couple of his riders, and Frank started over that way, noticing Hogan regarding him uneasily from behind the bar.

"What's wrong?" Frank said. "Got my hat on backwards?"

"I just hope to hell nobody tries to knock it off tonight," Hogan muttered. "Not in my place."

"Another glass, Hogan," Drucker said, grinning at Frank. Hogan grunted and slid a glass along the bar. "He's worried." Drucker grinned. "Can't forget you shot Teal in here, even though that was five years ago."

"Must've made an impression on him."

"Hard to forget first impressions," Drucker said. "Drink up."

There was a little lull in the uproar, and they heard someone along the bar say, "Lew and Rusty and Kay are drinking and wrangling over to the Casino. Lew's getting that look."

Drucker turned to Frank, then looked past him as the door swung open. Silence settled in the big room like dust after a windstorm. Men at the poker tables ceased their playing, and others eased away from the bar as if they were tired of leaning against it.

Frank turned and looked at Lew Reed, and at the two men behind Lew. He noticed that Rusty still carried the bulky saddlebags across his left shoulder, and that all three men needed shaves.

"How goes it Lew?" Frank asked.

Lew looked at Frank and then through him. He turned to the bar. "Hogan, a bottle."

Hogan, a confused expression on his face, reached quickly for the bottle standing in front of Frank and Drucker. As he picked it up, Frank said, "Just you leave it right there."

"Damn it, a fresh bottle!" Lew said. "I'm not like some who'll take another man's leavings, be it liquor or women."

"I'm buying you this drink," Frank said. He picked up the bottle by the neck and threw it spinning. Whisky sprayed and the bottle hit Lew in the chest with a dull thud. "Enjoy it, damn you!"

Men scattered like startled quail as Frank lunged at Lew, who stepped back and went for his gun. Drunken rage exploded from him as he stepped on the bottle and lost his balance, sprawling flat on his back, still clawing for his gun.

Frank reached him, wrenched the gun from Lew's fumbling fingers, and skidded it along the floor. Then he grabbed the front of Lew's shirt, lifted him and slammed him against the bar.

As he drove his fist to Lew's body, he heard Drucker say sharply, "Keep out of this, you two!" and he hit Lew again. Lew jackknifed with the blow, shoved away from the bar with a boot and threw a long looping right that caught Frank on the temple. Frank hit him in the face and Lew grunted and jerked his head to one side, his nose spraying blood. Frank hit him again in the face, and Lew kicked out at Frank's crotch.

Frank stepped back and grabbed at the swinging boot, and gave a quick pull. Lew's back hit the floor with a crash, and Frank landed on him with both knees, driving hammer blows to Lew's face. He hit Lew three times, then once again, smashing his fist into Lew's bloody face. As he raised his fist to hit him again, he felt fingers biting into his shoulder, and heard Drucker say, "That's enough, man!" and he rose on shaky legs, his breathing hoarse.

"Damn it," he breathed. "Damn him to hell."

"A mess," Drucker agreed. "You better get out of here."

" I guess," Frank said, still breathing hard, looking down at Lew, who was groaning and rolling his head.

"Where the hell's Obert?" Hogan

said plaintively. "Why wasn't he here to stop it? He knew there'd be trouble."

Someone laughed. The crowd began to stir like cattle coming awake. Rusty Rose and Dan Kay had Lew on his feet and were leading him to a table.

"You tell him when he wakes up that next time I see him he'll get the same thing," Frank said to their backs, his voice shaking.

They put Lew on a chair, and Lew sat there with his blood-smeared face in his arms, muttering incoherently as Dan Kay shook him. Kay shrugged and looked at Rusty, and they seemed to make up their minds about something. They turned as one and headed for the back door.

"Nice friends," Drucker said contemptuously. "Reckon I'd better take over. Do it for Joel's sake. He's in town, ain't he?"

"At the hotel."

"You'd better get over there yourself," Drucker said. "Guess this finishes it. Lew's gonna be mighty sick when he wakes up."

Frank went to his room at the hotel, where he washed thoroughly, afterwards stretching out on the bed with his clothes on. He found himself beginning to feel half sorry for Lew. There was no pleasure in whipping an old friend, even though Lew had asked for it. He wondered if Lew had had enough, and then felt himself falling asleep.

Someone knocked on the door and woke him up. He sat up at once, struck a match to light the lamp, then blew it out and cautiously opened the door.

Nora and Aunt Emma stood in the lamplit hallway, the minister behind them. Nora looked pale and upset, Aunt Emma grim and tight-lipped, and Petersen had a sheepish expression on his long face.

Before Frank could speak, Nora said, "We heard about the fight, and that Lew is looking for you. Frank, we have a buggy downstairs. We have to leave here at once."

"I'm not leaving," Frank said angrily. "What's the matter with you people? Petersen you shouldn't have brought Nora here."

"Just what I said," Aunt Emma said grimly. "But she wanted to come."

"You can't stay here!" Nora cried. "Don't make things worse than they already are."

"Be worse if he runs," Aunt Emma said grimly.

"I don't care about that! I want him alive! I don't want to go back East remembering a grave."

"That's enough," Frank said. "Now you go on home and stay there. Don't be wandering around the town."

"She'll just have to learn to take the bitter with the sweet," Aunt Emma said. "What kind of a man would he be letting another man run him out of town the night before his wedding?"

"You be quiet!" Nora cried. "You're not marrying him."

"Go on now, and get some sleep," Frank said. "I want to see peaches in your cheeks tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Nora said bitterly. "Maybe you'll be dead tomorrow."

"That's no way to talk. You don't really want to run, do you? And remember it the rest of your life?"

"I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Nothing's happened yet, and there most likely won't. Now do like I say and go home and get some sleep. And let's have a little smile before you go."

"I'm afraid," Nora said, smiling shak-

ily. "Everything has been perfect, and now this. What's got into Lew? What's the matter with him to act this way?"

"Lew," the minister said, "has crossed to the side of the devil." He put his hand lightly on Nora's elbow. "As much as I dislike to, I'll have to agree that Frank is right. He'll have to see this through, and we can't help him in that. So we'd better leave now. It's past midnight, and the wedding is only a few hours away."

Frank watched them going along the hall and down the stairs. As he turned back to his room, a door down the hall opened and Joel Reed stepped out. He had pulled on his pants and boots, and his suspenders hung down his backside. Al Yonkers came out behind him.

"Enough talk to wake the dead," Joel said. "True you and Lew had a fight?"

"That's right."

"Heard her say he's looking for you," the old cattleman said fretfully. "I'm gonna find that boy and give him some lip."

"I wouldn't," Yonkers said. "He's probably drunk, and won't know what he's doing or saying."

"You keep out of this. He's my son."

"Get him riled and he'll talk!" Yonkers said, his voice rising.

"The hell with that," the old cattleman flared. "This is between me and my son."

"What son, you old fraud?" a thick voice said, and they turned and saw Lew standing at the back of the hall, his face red and swollen in the lamplight. "What son?"

"You, you damn fool," old Joel said angrily. "What's all this about getting Frank? Can't you take your licking like a man, or didn't I raise you right?"

"Go to hell, you old thief—"

"Shut your big mouth," Yonkers said roughly, starting for Lew.

"The both of you can go to hell! Telling me you got started the hard way, trading cattle in Texas—"

"I told you, shut up!" Yonkers said, his voice dangerous. Lew drew his gun and Yonkers stopped. "Kill me, would you?"

"You're damn right I would," Lew said in that thickly angry voice. He was looking steadily at his father. "I've heard of men stealing to get started in the cattle business, but I never would've thought you two were thieves." He laughed harshly, still glaring at his father. "You don't like that, do you?"

"You're drunk and making a fool of yourself," the old man said steadily. "That I don't like."

"There's a few things I don't like, either," Lew said. "Like happening to overhear you and Al talking to that saddle tramp at the ranch last fall. Said he wanted money, or he'd send word to the sheriff that you and Al was wanted in Texas for a bank holdup."

"That happened twenty-four years ago. Before you was born."

"And what about that saddle tramp? He didn't leave the ranch alive, did he? Hell, no, Al took care of him. I got the gully marked where he's buried."

"He'd have talked, and I'd have done anything to keep you from learning the truth," the old man said stiffly.

"Had me believing all these years you slaved to get started," Lew said thickly out of his swollen mouth. "Working forty and found, and me proud of you! Never stopped to think how it's possible for a man to buy land and cattle at one shot from what he'd saved working forty and found. Man

can do it, though—" He laughed harshly, giving Frank a brief hard glance. "He done it. Damn near killed him, but he done it. Yeah, and I helped him. He never stole anything, either, except he stole my girl."

"Why don't you quit talking like a ten-year-old?" Frank said roughly.

"He's after my hide, not yours," old Joel Reed said. "He's got a mad on and he's been taking it out on you, but it's me he's after."

The old man was looking past his son, and Frank saw Ed Crane coming up behind Lew, gun in hand, that reckless grin frozen on his face, Lew sensed him there, started to turn and Crane said softly, "Hold it, Lew, and drop your hardware."

"Found out, did you?" Lew said, still holding his gun.

"Obert got word a couple hours ago, but he kept it quiet till I went on duty." Crane chuckled. "Said he wanted to be alive to eat his chuck in the morning. Your pals run out on you?"

"I reckon so."

Old Joel said, his voice shaky now, "What's he done?"

"Robbed the Springer bank a couple days ago," Crane said softly. "Shot a teller deader'n hell." He paused. "Drop the gun, Lew."

"Sure," Lew said, He laughed and swung to fire. Ed Crane shot him in the side, and Lew leaned against the wall, the gun hanging from his hand. "Damned old thief," he mumbled, and started to walk stiffly and doggedly towards the stairs, but he fell headlong before ever reaching them.

The old cattleman gave a hoarse cry and ran to his son. Men came pounding up the stairs. Al Yonkers glanced briefly and dangerously at Frank and backed into his room.

"Damned fool shouldn't have tried that," Ed Crane said, the frozen grin still on his face. "Gave him every chance, ain't that so?"

"Shut up about it."

"I thought sure you were a goner, him coming up here." Crane said, looking fondly at his gun before holstering it. "What happened? The old man talk him out of it?"

"That's close enough," Frank said, watching Joel straighten up.

"We could've got all three if that damn Obert had any guts," Crane said, and walked away.

Al Yonkers came from the room, fully dressed, and he and Joel looked at each other for a silent moment. Then Yonkers said heavily, "I'm clearing out."

"Suit yourself," the old cattleman said.

"Somebody else might've heard the kid. I ain't taking no chances."

"Nobody's holding you."

Al Yonkers looked at the old man a moment longer, then hurried along the hallway to the back stairs. Frank walked up to old Joel, saying, "I'm sorry."

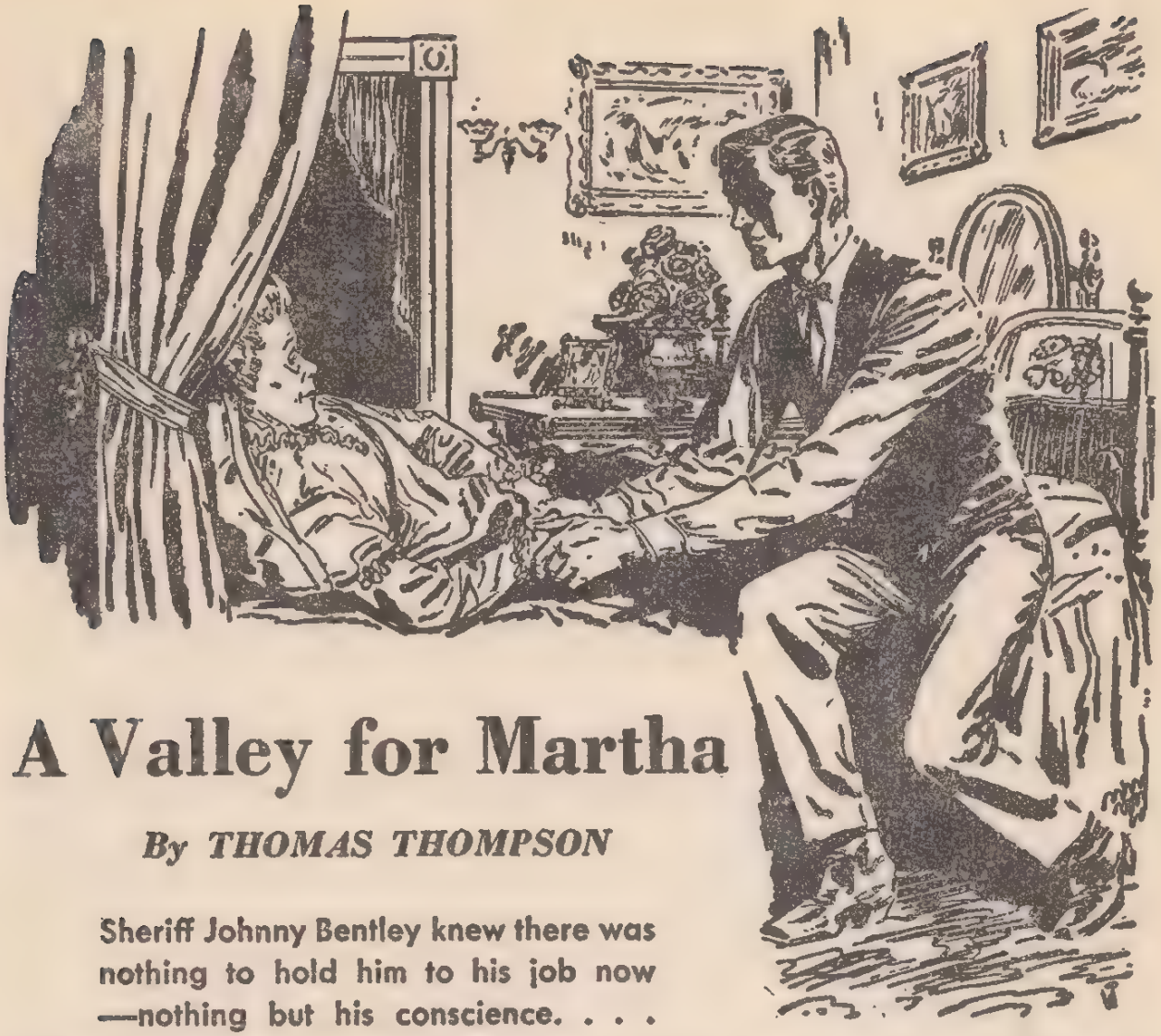
"It was for him," the old man said woodenly, turning his back to the men who were lifting his son and carrying him downstairs. "I had his mother picked out and the feeling that he was coming. Wanted more for him than I'd had, but times were tough. I did it for him."

Frank didn't say anything.

"He was taking his spite out on you, that's all. It was me he hated, and I killed him. I killed him before he was born, and I didn't know it."

"Don't think of it that way, Joel."

"That's how it was," the old man said, turning away. "I killed him before he was born, and I didn't know it."



A Valley for Martha

By ***THOMAS THOMPSON***

Sheriff Johnny Bentley knew there was nothing to hold him to his job now —nothing but his conscience. . . .

THE DOCTOR CLOSED THE DOOR softly and stepped out onto the balcony that overlooked the main room of the saloon. He was a small man, thin and tired, deliberate in the way he wiped the perspiration from the lenses of his glasses. He didn't look directly at the young man who stood there waiting.

He said, "You want it straight, don't you, Johnny?"

"No hope, eh?" Johnny Bentley said. He took a cigar case from the pocket of his brocaded vest, opened the case, then closed it without taking out a cigar. His hands were long and lean and brown.

"She'll live a half hour, maybe," the doctor said.

"Does she know?" Johnny Bentley's blue eyes caught the doctor's gaze and held it. There was a commanding directness about Johnny Bentley's eyes.

"Has anyone ever kept anything from Martha?" the doctor asked.

The corners of Johnny's wide mouth tightened. "No one except Matt Savage," he said. He walked to the door and for a second he hesitated, a tall, lean youth in his early twenties. He had become a man before he was through being a boy and now he was faced with the fact that he had started down the wrong road. He waited for the doctor's nod of approval and then he entered the room. He didn't feel the smile that was on his face.

It was the room of a woman to whom

gaudiness spelled luxury. There was too much fringe and too much cheap silk and too many fussy antimacassars and too much light. Johnny reached up and turned down the gas jet and the woman in the bed said, "Let the lights burn bright, Johnny. This is the last act."

Johnny turned up the lights. "Sure, Martha," he said. "The last act. A new show tomorrow."

The woman pressed the tips of well manicured fingers together and gazed up at the mirrored ceiling. "I wonder what it will be like? No smoke, no fumes, no loud talk." She shook her shoulders deeper into the down pillow. "I won't like it, Johnny."

"A brass band for you, Martha," he said. "A circus wagon with six white horses."

She looked at him and smiled and it was hard for him to realize she was dying. She was forty-five years old; she was his mother. Martha Felton, songs and dances. She had never relinquished her maiden name, even during the short time she was married to Johnny's father. It was a bit of rebellion that was in her—a reluctance to let go of anything that was hers. Matt Savage hadn't asked her to change her name. She started to cough and her cheeks were red. She was embarrassed then and she apologized to her son.

"Matt isn't back yet?" she asked.

"Not yet." He turned his head so she wouldn't see what was in his eyes. There was no sense of her knowing of the trouble between her son and her husband.

"Matt's been good to me." she said, almost as if she knew Johnny's thoughts. She propped herself up on the pillow and when he went to help her she waved him away. A lump started forming in his chest and rose into his throat and choked him.

"You'll be all right, Martha," he said. "The doc says—"

She half turned her head and pouted her lips in that chiding way he had known all his life. "Haven't I taught you better than that?" she said. "Lying to your own mother."

"Hang it, Martha—"

"Don't get sentimental, Johnny," she said. "The world was all right. I've loved it all and two men have loved me —your father and Matt Savage. Things would have been different for you if your father had lived, Johnny, but he didn't. I've done the best I knew how. I've tried hard to never hurt anyone. I hope I haven't hurt you."

"Me?"

"Can you still tell right from wrong, Johnny? You could when you were a little tyke."

The sheriff's badge Johnny wore was hidden by the lapel of his coat. He felt it there, heavy and pressing with responsibility he had ignored because of easy money and because he didn't want his mother to know the full truth about the man she had married. The badge seemed to burn into his flesh and he thought of the ultimatum he had served on Matt Savage.

"I can still tell," he said.

"I'm glad, Johnny," she said. "I'm glad you can make up your own mind."

He couldn't tell her that he had made up his mind about her husband—that the break between himself and Matt Savage was already too big to close. He said, "Sure, Martha." He sat down on the edge of the bed and took her hands in his. "Everything's all right, see?" The lump choked and he felt the moisture in his eyes and he tried to blink it back.

"No sentiment," she said. He knew her voice was weaker.

There was a long silence between them, a silence in which the ticking of the china clock with its two silver cupids filled the room. A silence in which the room itself pressed in on Johnny and sickened him and at the same time endeared itself to him and he knew he would always remember

it, because it was her. No pastel shades here. Reds and greens and yellows. That was Martha.

"Promise me something?" she said softly.

"Anything, Martha," he said. "You know that."

"Give Matt a chance. A man who has been as good to me as Matt Savage has been can't be all bad. I know about the valley, Johnny. But I loved Matt and he loved me."

It was the last thing in the world he had expected her to say, and yet he should have known. No one had ever fooled Martha Felton. Why had he supposed that the two men she loved could fool her? He thought of big Matt Savage, ruthless, smashing everything in his way to get what he wanted, a man who had hired guns to take over a valley. He put his hands behind his back and crossed his fingers to help with the lie.

"Matt and I will work out something," he said. "We always have."

The last part of the statement was true. By swallowing his conscience Sheriff Johnny Bentley had always been able to work out something with Matt Savage. But in time a man gagged on his conscience. An out and out land grab coupled with murder was too big to swallow.

"One more thing, Johnny?"

"Anything,"

"You'll think it's silly." She laughed that crazy little laugh. Weak now, but still that silly little laugh that made men love her.

"I won't think it's silly."

She didn't meet his eyes. "I want you to call me mother." She said it as if it were a joke. Everything was a big joke with Martha. "I just want to see how it feels."

He took her hands and leaned over her and kissed her on the forehead. There was a scent of perfume about her. The skin was hot against his lips, "Whatever happens, Mother," he said, "I'll remember that Matt Savage was good to you." He knew now that was what she wanted him to say.

She closed her eyes and now there were small jewels of tears at their corners. "You know how it makes me feel?" she asked. "Your calling me mother?" She opened her eyes abruptly, the dark lashes long, her eyes bright.

"How, Mother?"

"Old," she said. "And very tired." She closed her eyes and it seemed he could see the life ebbing away. "Martha Felton was never born to be old and tired," she said. She sighed once and smiled and that was the end.

Johnny drew the sheet up over her face. He shed no tears. Martha wouldn't want tears. "I hope it's not dark out there, Martha," he said. She hated the dark. Bright lights and gay music, that was Martha. And a man who loved her the way Matt Savage had loved her and flowers in her hair. Johnny Bentley unpinned the badge that was hidden behind his lapel. He put it on his vest where it could be seen easily, for he meant to make it mean something now. He stepped outside into the hall and his gun belt and gun were there on the chair where he had left them. He put the belt on and then he saw the doctor, standing there, leaning against the wall, looking at him.

"She's gone?" the doctor asked.

Johnny nodded.

"You could leave town, Johnny," the doctor said. "There's nothing holding you here now."

"Nothing but my conscience," Johnny Bentley said. "I had forgotten I had one."

"So had a lot of people, Johnny," the doctor said. "You won't have any help. Not even from the farmers in the valley. You can't expect them to suddenly trust you."

"I know that, Doc."

"You can't stand up to Matt Savage. You've never used a gun on a man in your life."

"A man's got to try," Johnny said.

An orchestra was playing on the main floor of the big saloon and a girl was singing a song. The girl looked up and saw Johnny Bentley coming down the stairs and she stopped singing and started to cry and then the orchestra stopped playing. A silence moved from table to table and finally reached the crowded bar and Johnny moved through the silence, feeling this tribute to Martha. He saw Pete Ellender, the sheep man, sitting at one of the tables with two of his gun crew. Pete Ellender waited until Johnny approached the table and then he said, "I'm sorry, Johnny. Does Matt know yet?"

"No," Johnny said. "He isn't back."

"He'll take it hard," Pete Ellender said, and that was the extent of his concession to sentiment. "You know where Matt went?"

"I don't know," Johnny said.

"He better get back," Pete Ellender said. "I'm all grazed off up there on the hill. I'm ready to move my sheep into the valley."

For a long moment Johnny stood there, a thing that he recognized as fear crawling in his stomach. He looked at Pete Ellender and at the two gunmen and said, "You boys check your guns with the bartender. There's an ordinance against wearing guns in this town."

Pete Ellender half rose from his chair, a flush of anger in his cheeks. It left and he settled down. "There wasn't no ordinance like that this morning," he said.

"There is now," Johnny said. "I'll take your guns."

Pete Ellender glanced around the crowded room. He looked at the badge on Johnny's vest and in time he grinned and winked at his two companions. "Sure, Johnny," he said. "If you want to make it look good." He drew his own gun and laid it on the table and his two riders followed suit.

"Don't wear guns in town again, Pete," Johnny said.

"Matt Savage made me a deal," Pete Ellender said quietly. "You know about the deal, Johnny?"

"I know about it," Johnny said.

"You saying you don't like the deal Matt made me?" Pete Ellender asked. He was a tall, thin man, his narrow face as expressionless as the gun he wore.

"If I don't," Johnny said, "I'll tell Matt."

"Yeah, Johnny," Pete Ellender said. "You do that. Matt promised me there wouldn't be anything standing in my way when I was ready to move my sheep into the valley. You agree with that, Johnny?"

Johnny picked up the guns from the table. "Your deal is with Matt Savage," he said. "Not with me." He took the guns over and gave them to the head bartender.

"Put those in the safe," he said. "Don't give them back until I say so."

He went out onto the street, suddenly feeling the need for air and quiet. The unsteadiness was still in his stomach. He had been lucky with Pete, he knew. Matt Savage wouldn't play into his hands that easily.

He walked up the board sidewalk until it ended and then kept walking through the residential part of town. The locust trees were in full leaf, a canopy across the street, and through the interlacing of branches he saw the stars and he remembered an old childhood tale Martha had told him. A new star in the sky tonight. A bright, new star.

He had walked beyond the limits of Matt Savages' town without realizing he had walked so far and now he was on the road to the valley that Matt Savage had promised to turn over to Pete Ellender, the sheep man. There were farms in that valley—a dozen of them—but that made no difference to Matt Savage. Matt had hired two gunmen who were good at this sort of thing and Pete Ellender had two of his own. Johnny Bentley, the sheriff, was sup-

posed to swear that the farmers had launched an unprovoked attack.

But there won't be any fight in that valley, Matt, Johnny said to himself. I told you I'd stop you and I will. I'll give you a chance to back down, because I promised Martha, and then if you don't it's got to be you and me. Again he felt that tug of honest fear in his stomach. He wasn't good with a gun and he knew it. Matt Savage would be good. Matt made it a point to be tops in anything he did. Even at making my mother love you Johnny thought.

The sound of a horse being ridden too fast broke into his thoughts. The sound grew louder as the rider came down the road from the valley, headed for the town, the frantic, hopeless sound of a rider racing against time. Johnny stepped out into the road and he recognized Matt Savage's big sorrel gelding even in the dim starlight. The horse was streaked with foam and Matt rode bent forward in his saddle, his left hand clutching a bundle of some sort. Matt saw Johnny standing there and must have recognized him, for he reined up hard, sliding the sorrel. "Martha?" Matt Savage asked.

"She's gone, Matt," Johnny said.

The big man seemed to sink deeper into his saddle. His wide shoulders slumped and his head dropped forward. For a long time he sat there and Johnny felt Matt's grief, as big as the man himself, a tangible thing in the darkness. After a while Matt lifted the newspaper wrapped bundle in his hand. "These are roses," he said simply. "Martha wanted some roses. They're hard to find in this country. I found these in the valley."

For a moment Johnny found it hard to remember the Matt Savage who could break a man's neck with his hands—the man who was an expert at every corruption a town could know—the Matt Savage who trampled men under foot to get his own way and would drive farmers from their homes with hired guns if it would make him a few dollars. For a moment Johnny saw only the Matt Savage that Martha had loved, and then he forced himself back to reality. He remembered Pete Ellender in there at the saloon with his two gunmen and he remembered the two gunmen Matt Savage had hired, gunmen who were supposed to be issued deputy sheriff's badges.

"Pete Ellender's in town," Johnny said. "He's ready to move his sheep."

"I figured he would be," Matt said.

"I took the guns away from him and his two hands," Johnny said.

He could feel Matt looking at him in the darkness, peering at him from under his full brows. "They can get other guns," Matt said. "You made a mistake doing that."

"Don't count on the two gunhawks you hired, Matt," Johnny said. "They're in jail. I charged them with vagrancy and locked them up."

"I could get them out," Matt said. "Any time I wanted." He dropped the bunch of roses to his side. "You don't know much about such things, Johnny. Keep out of it."

"I'm giving you a chance to change your mind, Matt," Johnny said. "If you don't, it's gonna be you and me. I want your answer, Matt."

Again there was that long silence and Johnny could feel Matt's eyes on him, hard, determined. He thought of the roses in Matt's hand and knew he would have a signal. Matt would have to drop those roses before he could go for gun.

"Your answer, Matt?" Johnny said.

"You're through, Johnny," Matt Savage said. "Get out of town. You've got one hour." He touched his spurs and rode on before Johnny could answer.

Johnny stood there in the road watching Matt ride into the darkness. He made himself think of the farmers in the valley, peace loving men with crops in the ground and flowers around their soddies, men with wives and kids.

Any momentary feeling he had for Matt Savage was gone. He started walking back toward the town, the tension building inside him, the gun at his hip swinging with his stride. There was only one way to stop a man like Matt Savage. Johnny had known that from the first.

He went to his own office first and got himself an extra gun, loaded it and thrust it into the waistband of his trousers. After that he checked to make sure Matt's hired gunmen were still in their cell, then he went back out onto the street, crossed over and was about to enter Matt's saloon when he heard the sound of horses up by the stable. He looked and saw Pete Ellender and his two riders heading out of town, their horses at a full lope, apparently bound for their nearby sheep camp. Johnny went into the saloon.

There was an unusual quiet here tonight. Martha had been well loved in her role as big Matt's hostess. There were only a half dozen men in the place and the girl entertainers had already quit for the night. The faro table was deserted, the dice table covered. Johnny spoke to the head bartender. "Is Matt here?"

"Just left," the bartender said. "Went over to the funeral parlor."

Again Johnny felt that close kinship with Matt, the kinship of sharing grief, and again he put it aside. He promised Martha he would give Matt a chance. He had done just that.

"What's up, Johnny?" the bartender asked. "I mean with Matt and Pete Ellender?"

"I'll have a drink," Johnny said.

"Sure, Johnny. On the house." The bartender set out a bottle and a glass and watched Johnny pour a shot." Matt had me open the safe and give Ellender a thousand dollars," the bartender said. "He talked to Pete Ellender a little while and then he give Pete the money."

"Did he give Pete and the boys their guns?"

"No he didn't," the bartender said. "But Matt took his own."

What was the difference, Johnny thought. It was like Matt said. Pete and his gunmen could always get other guns. "Thanks for the drink," Johnny said. He went outside and recrossed the street to the jail, wanting to wait a minute now, unwilling to go after Matt as long as Matt was at the funeral parlor.

One of the prisoners rattled the cell door. "You better let us out of here, Smart Boy," the prisoner called. "We're workin' for Matt Savage. Matt ain't gonna like it when he finds out you locked us in here."

"He already knows," Johnny said. "Gunhawks like you are a dime a dozen. Matt's already sent Pete Ellender out with cash to hire a couple more like you."

He got up and closed the barred door between his office and the cell block, turned down the lamp and pulled his hat down solidly on his head. He started out the door, then hesitated a moment, his hand touching the badge on his vest. The shakiness in his stomach quieted some, and he opened the door and stepped out into the night. Across the street and down a block he could see the light in the undertaking parlor The door opened and Matt Savage came out and stood there, his hat in his hand. He was wearing a gun.

The light from the window slanted across Matt's face, making him a perfect target. He stood there alone, a brute of a man with iron grey hair and a square jaw blocking out a square face, a man who had never backed down in his life. He put on his hat and his right hand moved down and freed the gun in the holster. Johnny Bentley stepped off the sidewalk and started angling across the dark street. He heard the horses and half turned and he saw the three riders coming into the town at

an easy lope. He immediately recognized Pete Ellender and his two gunmen. Down there by the funeral parlor, Matt Savage had slipped into deep shadows and Johnny could no longer see him.

Johnny felt a tightening of all his muscles. His nerves sang like taut wires and sudden perspiration glued his shirt to his back and formed in a thin line on his upper lip. Pete Ellender and his men had pulled their horses into a walk now, but they were still coming, right down the street toward Johnny, and someplace in those shadows Matt Savage was waiting, a drawn gun in his hand. Matt's voice cut through the darkness. "I told you to get out of town, Johnny."

"Sorry, Matt," Johnny Bentley said. "I'm not taking your orders any more."

Pete Ellender and his riders had pulled to a stop and now they were dismounting, spreading out. "We got guns now, Matt," Pete called. He moved around behind his horse. "You, Johnny Bentley," Ellender called out. "You takin' a hand in this?"

"The kid's got no part in it," Matt called. "It's between you and me, Pete." There was a silence that seemed an eternity, then Matt's voice again. "I'll give you another thousand, Pete."

"Glad to have it, Matt," Pete Ellender said. "But I'll still move my sheep into that valley. You convinced me it was good sheep country."

"I told you no, Pete," Matt said.

Again that silence, and now Johnny Bentley, his heart thudding, bent low and ran across the street over toward the funeral parlor where he flattened himself against the building, a gun in his hand now. He didn't know exactly how it had happened, but he did know that somehow or other he and Matt Savage were suddenly on the same side, standing against Pete Ellender. It was a wonderful feeling that surged through him and drove out the tension and left him cool and sure. He could see the three horses there in the street but he couldn't see the men.

Pete Ellender said, "You're a fool, Matt. It was your idea in the first place. We had everything worked out. You're pulling a doublecross on me, Matt. You figure on taking that valley for yourself."

"It's not that, Pete," Matt said. "I told you I changed my mind."

"It's too bad you did, Matt."

That was the signal. There was a flash of flame across a saddle and a bullet thudded into the wall by Johnny's head. He fired back immediately, aiming deliberately for one of the horses, hearing the beast scream, seeing it rear. He saw a man running and Johnny's gun bucked in his hand and the man changed directions immediately and now Matt was firing.

There couldn't have been too many shots and yet it sounded like a thousand, a constant blast of sound and the stabs of orange flame and now three horses had broken loose and were running down the street and there in the street a man was threshing around, cursing vilely, and suddenly he started to cry. It was then that Johnny realized there was no longer any action from the corner of the building where Matt Savage had been. He started inching around, holding his breath, afraid to whisper Matt's name.

"Oh Matt?" Pete Ellender called.

There was no answer.

"Cover me," Ellender said. There was a sudden burst of firing and a flying splinter stabbed Johnny's cheek.

"We got 'em, boss," a voice said.

"I'll look," Pete Ellender said.

He kept moving forward, a cocked gun in his hand, a lean, dark shadow there in the street, and now he was nearly to the sidewalk, a hundred feet from where Johnny was standing, pressed against the building.

"Oh Matt?" Ellender called. "Bentley?"

"Here, Pete," Johnny Bentley said.

He pushed himself away from the building, his finger squeezing against the trigger of his gun. He saw the slant of flame from Pete Ellender's gun and knew Pete had fired into the ground and then he saw Pete falling forward, sprawling on the sidewalk.

Johnny fired twice more toward the street and now the deep boom of a shotgun blasted from the door of Matt's saloon and a man kept yelling, "Stop it now! Stop it!" A woman started to scream, a high pitched sound that rose and fell, and there was no further firing from the street as a dozen doors opened and armed men, citizens of the town, poured out onto the sidewalk. "Stop it, boys!" the man called again. "We got you covered, all of you. We ain't takin' sides but we aim to stop it!" A dozen dogs started barking and a baby cried.

Johnny Bentley dropped to his knees and crawled around the corner of the building. The huge bulk of Matt Savage was there against the wall, all hunched over, his hands clutching his stomach. "A light," Johnny yelled. "Somebody bring a light!"

"I told you to stay out of it, Johnny," Matt Savage said. "I told you to get out of town."

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to stand up to Pete Ellender?" Johnny said. "Why, Matt?"

"Didn't want you mixed up in it," Matt Savage said. "Martha wouldn't of liked it. You might of got killed." Matt's breathing was a rasping sound in the night.

"You tried to buy Pete off with that thousand dollars."

"It didn't work," Matt said. "Knew it wouldn't. But it gave me time to go see Martha." He fought for his breath and now a man with a lantern was there and the light fell on the face of the town boss, a rugged face, harsh, uncompromising. And Johnny Bentley saw only the kindness around the eyes.

Johnny moved close to the big man and put an arm around his shoulder "What made you change your mind Matt?" he asked.

"Not you," Matt Savage said. "Don't go gettin' the big head thinkin' you made Matt Savage back down. No man ever did that."

It was the last thing Matt ever said and Johnny Bentley moved off into the darkness wanting to be alone with the violent sickness that shook him. Pete Ellender was dead. One of his men was seriously wounded. The other stood meekly, the fight gone out of him. A stunned silence fell over the town and then, group by group, men started talking about the changes that had to be made. Matt Savage was dead and Matt Savage's town would die with him, making way for a better town where a thing like this could never happen again.

Why did you change your mind, Matt? Johnny Bentley wanted to know. Why?

It was early the next morning when the buckboard came in from the valley. The buckboard pulled up in front of Matt Savage's saloon and the old man climbed down and asked for Matt. He stood there, his jaw unhinged, while Johnny told him what had happened.

"His wife?" the old man asked.

"She died early last night," Johnny said.

"I'm sorry," the old man said, taking off his hat. "I never liked Matt Savage. I never would of liked him. But when he stopped by my place last evening and told me about his wife being sick he asked if he could pick some roses." The old man shrugged. "I didn't figger Matt Savage would ever show anybody that much consideration."

"A man can be wrong," Johnny said.

"It could be," the old man said. He moved toward the bed of the buckboard. "You suppose he'd still want these?" the old man said. "He paid for 'em." He pulled back the canvas. The buckboard was heaped high with roses.

Tears stung Johnny's eyes but the old man didn't notice.

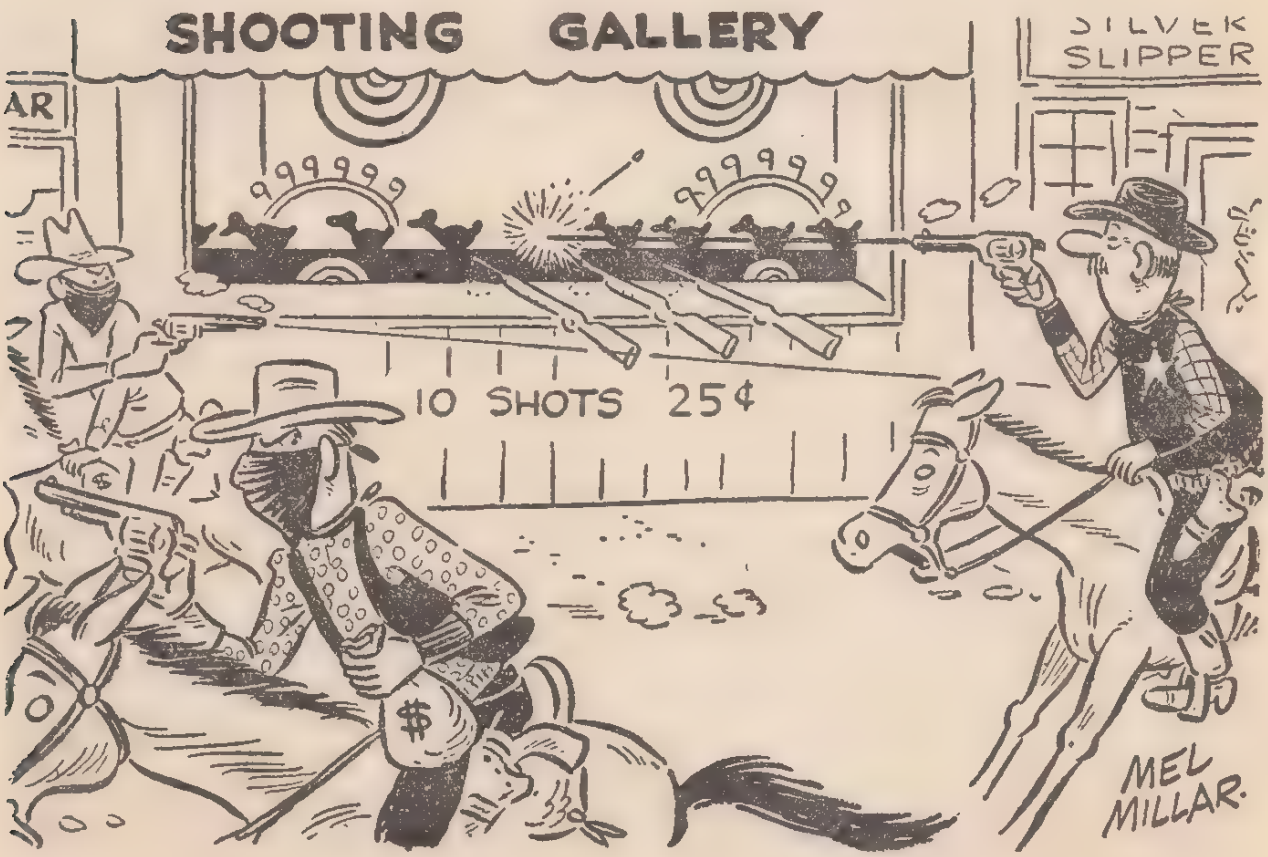
"He said his wife liked roses and all kind of flowers," the old man said. "Asked me if when his wife got well he could bring her out to our place and show her the flowers. Lots of flowers in the valley. Most all the folks out there got flowers around their places." The old man wiped a finger under his nose. "We got plenty roses," he said. "Kind of a hobby with my wife." He looked helplessly at the wagon load of flowers. "You reckon he'd still want these, son?"

"He'd want them," Johnny said. "And so would she."

Johnny turned away then, wanting to be alone, and he knew now why Matt Savage had changed his mind about moving sheep into the valley. He thought of the fence lines where roses grew and the soddies with flowers around them, places Matt Savage wanted Martha to see. There wouldn't be any flowers if the sheep moved in. There wouldn't be much of anything, after a year or two.

It was a hard thing to understand, in a way. Matt had known Martha was dead. He had known she would never see the valley. A hard thing to understand, and yet, Johnny Bentley understood it.

I said once that a gun was the only thing that could stop a man like you, Matt, Johnny thought. I was wrong. I guess yesterday I was too young to believe that a love like you and Martha had can keep right on living after death. I'm not too young now, Matt.



The true story of one of the bloodiest battles in the Indian Wars.

By W. H. HUTCHINSON

the LONG SHADOW of SAND CREEK

THE COUNCIL MET AT CAMP WELD, two miles up the Platte from Denver City, in the last week of September, 1864, with the autumn haze creeping down the Front Range peaks and the promise of winter in the air of morning. Both sides to the parley, red and white alike, wanted peace for their own reasons.

The Cheyenne and Arapahoe wanted peace because winter was coming when it was not easy to strike and get away, when it was easier to draw their treaty rations from the Agent at Fort Lyons and live safely until spring came again and the grass was tall enough to keep their horses. The white men wanted peace because the last six months had made all of Colorado Territory as nervous as a bush full of juncos watching a cat. Upwards of eighty settlers had been killed; the freight and stage lines east so harassed that flour was $45 a barrel if obtainable; for three hundred miles of the Big Sandy in Kansas all buildings had been burned and all movable property taken; and there was no white man's livestock between Julesburg and Fort Lupton.

Black Kettle and White Antelope spoke for their side of the meeting and with them was Major Edward Wynkoop, 1st Colorado Cavalry, who commanded at Fort Lyon, a post on the Santa Fe Trail. Fort Lyon doubled as Agency Post for the seventy-mile square area on both sides of the Arkansas River that was meant to give living room to the people who followed Black Kettle and White Antelope. These men

were warriors, mature in their craft and skilled at the circumlocutions of treaty talk. They had delivered up four white prisoners—one woman, three children—as earnests of their good faith and Major Wynkoop had pledged his word they would get home safely from this meeting regardless of its outcome.

John Evans, Governor of Colorado Territory, ex-officio Superintendent of Indian Affairs, founder of one university in Illinois already at Evanston, destined to found another in the capital city of the new Territory, spoke for his people. Between them was Simeon Whitely of the Indian Bureau, to take down the talk with a straight pen, and dominating the meeting was a preacher by trade, a soldier by instinct, a man with the build of a blacksmith and a mind ruled by the precepts of the Old Testament—Colorado's "Preacher Colonel," John Milton Chivington, commanding the Military District of Colorado in the Department of Missouri. On the evidence, Colonel Chivington had more title than he did troops. He knew it just as well as the warriors he had skirmished against all the past months.

The Civil War back East had drained the frontier of Regulars. Confederate agents had supplied the tribes with guns and powder and caps and the tribes themselves were quick to see that when white man fought against white there was a chance for plenty coups and much plunder.

Chivington's twelve cavalry companies, disposed along the north-south axis of the Territory from the Raton Peaks to the Laramie Plains, had kept the warriors out like a mesquite keeps out sunlight. His failure was in the facts that lay behind Governor Evans's mind as he peace-parleyed with the Cheyenne leaders. His one success had come a scant month before and it had been a memorable experience for Colorado.

Rumors had come out of the silent spaces of the Plains for almost a year before that the Cheyenne and Arapahoe had formed a concerted conspiracy to eradicate every white skin in the Territory. In August, 1864, Elbridge Gerry, a grandson of that same name who signed the Declaration of Independence, killed a horse making the seventy miles from his ranch on Cherry Creek to bring Governor Evans the word that the day was set.

Gerry had a Cheyenne wife and because of this, he had been warned by the warriors to "get out of the way." Instead, he rode to Denver City with the word and Chivington it was who took what raw recruits he could find and so disposed them that the general slaughter came to naught. But the fear of a general massacre had crystallized in the frontal lobe of every Colorado mind and stayed there. John Chivington, however, was armored against fear of any kind by several factors.

Born near Lebanon, Ohio, in 1821, he had grown up on the log cabin frontier of the Old Northwest, learning the blacksmith's trade, listening to his father's stories of fighting Shawnee and British in the War of 1812. He was just twenty-seven years old when something turned him from striking iron to smiting sinners hip-and-thigh and he was ordained a minister of the Methodist-Episcopal Church, preaching his maiden sermon at Quincy, Illinois.

Nine years later, he was made Presiding Elder of his Church in Nebraska, where his "camp meeting prayers" and his Abolitionist beliefs made him a powerful influence. He had stayed in Nebraska until 1860 when his church needed someone to handle their Faith in the gold-spawned camps of Colorado Territory. As Presiding Elder for the Rocky Mountain District, Chivington covered the Territory like boils covered Job until the summer of 1861.

He was tendered the Chaplaincy of

the First Colorado Volunteer Infantry, then being recruited to help General Canby save New Mexico from the rampant, gray-clad Texans under Sibley. But John Chivington declined the offer. He would go to the Wars as a fighting man in the ranks and he did, as Major of the Regiment. In the two battles in Glorieta Pass, Pigeon's Ranch and Apache Canyon, Chivington performed with great gallantry and with a surprising tactical skill that played a decisive part in the victories that saved the Southwest for the Union.

The boys from Pike's Peak learned quickly that Preacher Chivington's six-foot-seven frame and full beard made easy guides to follow towards the enemy. When Colonel Slough resigned the Colonelcy of the First, Chivington had been promoted Colonel on the strength of a petition to General Canby signed by practically every officer and man of the Regiment. Thereafter, he commanded the southern district of New Mexico out of Fort Craig for General Canby, later moving his regiment to Fort Union where he took a leave of absence and went to Washington.

His Washington mission was only partly successful; he managed to get the First Colorado changed over to cavalry but the War Department turned a deaf ear to his request that he and his regiment be transferred to the Army of the Potomac where there was ample opportunity to fight. Returning to Denver, Chivington had been made overall commander of military forces in Colorado, under General Curtis at Fort Leavenworth. He had found time to assist in formally organizing his Church in Colorado, thus separating it from the Nebraska jurisdiction.

Governor Evans, appointed by President Lincoln to hold Colorado for the Union, was a fellow churchman and between them the Governor and the Colonel assessed gamblers, saloonkeepers, and other businessmen with a fine impartiality to dedicate a $21,000 church absolutely free of debt. Besides this feat, Chivington had tangible evidence of what his soldiers thought of him. They raised a purse of $550 with which they commissioned E. L. Gallatin, Colorado's pioneer saddler, to build a hull for their Colonel. Gallatin did; a full-skirted, hand-stamped, carved and inlaid rigging that deserved its title, "the most expensive saddle built in the United States." He rode this saddle to Camp Weld, his three hundred pounds filling it to overflowing, and it made an eye-filling sight in the clear Colorado sunlight as the peace talk ran from mouth to mouth and Simeon Whitely set it all down for the record.

Black Kettle and White Antelope made no great effort to deny that many depredations had been committed the past spring and summer. Wherever they could, they blamed it on their "young men" or on other bands of Cheyenne than theirs or upon the Arapahoes under Raven. When asked who had set one detachment of the First Colorado afoot less than a month before, they looked at Chivington's bulk and his beard and his handsome saddle and admitted that they had gained ten horses at no risk at all. When asked who had killed the Hungate family on Cherry Creek in June, husband, wife and two children, they calmly laid it on Roman Nose.

In short, they admitted just enough to lend credence to their contriteness. Whatever the Colonel and the Governor may have felt inside, they knew that peace was something to be bought until they could do something else about it. The council would probably have come up with a solution to both sides' desire for a cessation of hostilities had not the telegraph line from headquarters stuttered out a message to Colonel Chivington:

Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.
September 28, 1864.

Colonel Chivington:

I shall require the bad Indians de-

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.....

livered up; restoration of equal numbers of stock; also hostages to secure. I fear the agent of the Indian Department will be ready to make presents too soon. No peace must be made without my direction.

S. R. Curtis, Major General.

General Curtis was plain enough in what he wanted but his field officer, Chivington, had no way of making these demands stick. He could have collared Black Kettle and White Antelope right then and there for hostages but Wynkoop, who had served under Chivington in New Mexico, had given his word. The council broke up without any definite conclusions save the obvious ones that the Cheyennes were not going to deliver any *bad Indians*, restore any stolen stock, or give any hostages to ensure good behaviour in the future. Wynkoop took the chiefs back to Fort Lyons, gave them an American flag to fly above their lodges, issued them rations, and allowed them to camp at Fort Lyons until he was relieved of his command on November 6, 1864, for "temporizing with hostiles."

He was succeeded by Major Scott J. Anthony, who also had served under Chivington in New Mexico, and who promptly reported that some six hundred Cheyenne under Black Kettle were coming back to Fort Lyons to talk more peace and that some thousand more, mixed Cheyenne and Arapahoe under Raven, were camped on the Smoky Hill Fork of the Republican, beyond Sand Creek, waiting better weather before they, too, came in to talk peace. This information brought the Third Colorado Cavalry into the field.

When the fear of a general Indian plot to massacre all Colorado erupted in August, Governor Evans had been authorized by the War Department to raise another regiment of volunteers for one-hundred-day service. Recruiting had gone well but once recruited, the men had no arms nor mounts available. Time dragged by while these were secured, the arms from rejected stands of the Federal forces back east, the horses from wherever they could be found of whatever kind.

To keep from feeding the troops, and to avoid garrison boredom, coupled with the fact that many of the men who volunteered for service with the Third had hay to make or businesses to run, furloughs were granted with an open hand. When Major Anthony's report came in, and both Governor and Colonel decided the time was right to strike a blow for Colorado, the Third Colorado was scarcely above half strength at five hundred men. This made little difference to John Milton Chivington. As little difference as did the weather.

He took his raw command out of Denver in the late November, in the aftermath of a furious snowstorm, and headed South across the Divide toward Colorado City and Pueblo, where he turned down the Arkansas along the Santa Fe Trail. The Third Colorado under George Shoup's direct command were equipped with Austrian-patent muskets, large bore but poor direction, using a paper cartridge that had to be bitten off to load the piece. In addition, there were parts of two companies of the First Colorado, 125 men in all ranks, plus a wagon train and four mountain howitzers. Chivington's scouts were headed by Jim Beckwourth, the fabulous mulatto mountain-man now in his sixty-sixth year, and included the Autobee brothers, Antoine Genise, whose wife was a Sioux, Ed Safely, and Duncan Kerr. His courier and despatch rider was a seventeen-year-old kid named Billy Breakenridge.

Leaving Pueblo behind, Chivington fanned out his scouts and pickets with orders to take along anyone they met headed in the other direction. The column

forged steadily downstream, keeping the news behind them, and reached Fort Lyons at four in the afternoon, November 28, 1864. Chivington's picket screen surrounded the Fort before the main body arrived, keeping any hangers-on from getting away with news of the troop movement, and his scouts bypassed the Fort completely, fading out into the sea of grass northeast to locate the hostiles' camp. They also had to learn if Raven had come down from the Smoky Hill Fork to join Black Kettle and his band. While he waited for his scouts to report, while his men drew saddle rations of bacon, biscuit and extra ammunition from the wagons, Colonel Chivington conferred with Major Anthony and with Samuel Colley, Indian Agent in residence.

Major Anthony's report was pistol plain. When Black Kettle and his people showed up at Fort Lyons, Anthony had followed his orders, demanding all guns, stolen property and perpetrators of depredations among them. He had gotten some twenty guns that wouldn't fire with a blasting cap—and that was all, except Cheyenne double-talk. Issuing enough rations to bribe Black Kettle to leave again, Anthony had watched them trail back toward Sand Creek with mixed emotions—exasperation and relief. The larger contingent under Raven, the ones said to be camped on Smoky Hill Fork, had never showed up at the Fort and Anthony did not know their whereabouts.

He had received no orders direct from General Curtis that in any way changed the telegram of September 28 to Chivington, *No peace must be made without my direction*, and had the Department Commander wished to head off Chivington's winter campaign, Fort Lyon was the place to do it. With the military situation unchanged, Colonel Chivington took council with Samuel Colley, the Indian Agent, since the Indian Bureau and the Army did not always see eye to eye on matters of policy or procedure concerning the original freeholders of the Plains.

On the evidence available, Samuel Colley was a sincere, conscientious and frustrated man. His duties were to administer the Government's side of the Treaty of 1861 and see that the tribes lived up to their end of the bargain. This is why he was frustrated. The treaty of 1861 called for the Cheyenne and Arapahoe to relinquish their ancestral lands between the Arkansas and the Platte in return for a cash settlement of $450,000, payable in annual instalments, and a smaller area of land. Fort Lyon was designated as the official Agency for this smaller area and for the treaty payments that went with it.

The only trouble with this treaty, as with others, was simply that no chief had the right to sign away his tribally claimed lands. That the various chiefs who touched the pen did have this right was a pleasant fiction invented by the white man to make the land grabs easier. The Cheyenne and 'Rapahoe concerned ignored the treaty, save when it served their purpose or their purse, and kept right on ranging where they had always ranged since Pike's Peak was a hole in the ground. Colley informed Chivington in the presence of the latter's staff that he had been able to do nothing with his alleged wards for the last six months. In his opinion, the only thing that would bring them to time was a good sound thrashing.

At 8 p.m., November 28, Chivington jumped off from Fort Lyon, having added Major Anthony and 125 cavalry from the garrison to his command. Chivington also acquired Robert Bent, son of William Bent and Owl Woman, a Cheyenne woman, for a local guide. They rode steadily northeast in the clear, biting cold of a November night and the troopers soon found a use for those damned paper cartridges. They bit off the end and rubbed the powder in their eyes to keep awake.

It was about three o'clock by the stars when the scouts came in with part of the Cheyenne pony herd they had run off; Chivington sent his prize back to Fort Lyon with a detail when some one hundred of the horses proved to be US or private animals. The scouts also had the location of the hostile camp—in the big bend of Sand Creek about six miles distant—and its size. Billy Breakenridge heard Jim Beckwourth tell the Colonel there were 130 lodges of Cheyenne, ten of 'Rapahoe. Old Jim wasn't spinning windys to town greenhorns when he gave his figures.

On this basis, the camp contained between 650 and 700 people, maybe 250 warriors. Chivington had the artillery and the odds with him and by the evidence of the captured horses, he had the element of surprise. The Colonel took advantage of them all as he formulated his battle plan in his mind while the command moved across those last six fateful miles. If Chivington had any other thoughts on his mind besides tactical moves, they were of the ingrained teachings that bespoke The Sword of the Lord and of Gideon. But a whole complex of other forces surged up in the minds of his troopers, particularly the Third Colorado, as they rode in the bitter cold of early morning.

Too many of them felt the tension in their bellies knotting tighter and tighter with every creak of saddle leather as they remembered what they had read and heard and too often seen. Too many of them had lost friends, or relatives or property to the Indians in the months preceding. Too many of them had seen the bodies of the Hungate family laid out for public inspection in Denver City. Too many of them had read of the captives surrendered by Black Kettle the previous September and how several of them had died as a result of their treatment in captivity.

And all of them remembered Governor Evans's proclamation urging all Coloradoans to go after Indians and kill them wherever they found them and to take whatever they could capture as spoils of war. They followed the silhouetted bulk of Colonel Chivington and muttered of these things among themselves to keep their anger warm and their hearts strong, for the Third Colorado were not soldiers but ranchers, miners, merchants, millhands, lawyers, doctors, farmers—a cross-section of the Territorial populace.

The night was almost gone when Colonel Chivington halted his command where the bank line above Sand Creek would shield him from early rising eyes below. As Beckwourth had described it, the creek bed here was some two hundred yards wide, speckled with cottonwoods and willows, with a little living water running down the middle of the stream beneath eight-foot banks.

The Third Colorado was split to cover both ends of the Bend, east and west. The howitzers, with seasoned troopers of the First to serve them, were placed in the center while the remainder of the First was detailed to follow the Colonel down the middle of the attack. The twisty early light ran along the eastern skyline and grew stronger, as the center of the attack waited. When the first red glow of sunrise appeared, the howitzers opened the ball and Chivington's men followed him over the bank into Sand Creek.

The howitzers' roar brought the camp to startled life and frantic movement. White Antelope came outside to drop before Duncan Kerr's rifle, perhaps the first casualty of the fight. Black Kettle ran up the American flag, found that it did no good, grabbed his wife by the hand, and ignominiously fled the fight. In the excitement of their first fire fight, the Third Colorado forgot all about discipline and broke up into individual knots of shouting, shooting men. The confusion gave the Cheyennes time to rally, and thereafter

they fought like Cheyennes, many of their women fighting with them in the rifle pits they scooped out of the sandy soil under the overhanging banks. As these fought, all the women and children who could, fled north, past the excited segments of the Third Colorado, and the horses they had close-hobbled or picketed to their lodges went with them.

The fight swayed up and down the valley of Sand Creek all that morning and well into the afternoon. It was no longer a planned engagement but a typical militia, blockhouse, every-man-for-himself scrimmage, and in the Colonel's mind, if no one else's, was the fear that the escaping hostiles might take the word to Raven on the Smoky Hill and bring down a fresh horde of Cheyenne horsemen which was something quite different from Cheyenne fighting afoot. But the Colonel's fears were groundless that day. Despite the disorganized command, despite the fact that the howitzers were useless after the opening rounds because of the melee, the fight came to a close about two o'clock in the afternoon. Using the largest and cleanest lodges for his hospital and field headquarters, Colonel Chivington figured up the fight. He had seven killed, forty-eight wounded, and one missing, as nearly as he could tell. By field reckoning, he had killed some five hundred hostiles, all ages and sexes, although later investigation halved this figure, and had eight captives. In the captured lodges, he found some twenty white scalps, plus the hardware, provisions, clothing, and utensils that represented all remaining after death swept a homestead or wagon train. Satisfied that he had done a job, Chivington sent his wounded and his captives back to Fort Lyon with Anthony and his troops, and struck across country for Denver City since the "100 days" of the Third Regiment were almost exhausted. He reached Denver in time for Christmas, in time for his men to sell their captured buffalo robes for $2 apiece, to show their scalps in the Opera House between the acts, and to be mustered out to date December 29, 1864.

Chivington went back to guarding the Colorado settlements with the thin screen of cavalry that was his permanent force and as far as he and his command were concerned, Sand Creek was over—another red entry in the double ledger accounting of the West—and the Territorial Legislature tendered him and his men a vote of thanks.

The news about Sand Creek took some time to reach Washington through channels; it took some more time for it to be officially digested. Then all hell broke lose. The Indian Bureau used it to condemn the military handling of all Indian matters. Traders and others who waxed fat cheating the Indians out of their treaty dues climbed on the band wagon. Pious folk who lived where no Indian had been seen since their forefathers slaughtered King Philip waxed sentimentally indignant. The fires thus lighted, fed, and fanned stirred politicians into action.

A Joint Congressional Committee investigated Sand Creek. The "Committee on the Conduct of the War" investigated Sand Creek. A special Military Committee was convened to investigate Sand Creek. The people and the politicians back East could stomach Grant's seventeen thousand casualties not counting Confederates, in The Wilderness—but here was barbarity far enough from home to be uncivilized, and the committees that investigated Sand Creek were loaded against Chivington, Governor Evans, and anyone else who had a hand in it. Chivington resigned his commission after being aquitted by a court-martial of any wrongdoing. Governor Evans was relieved of his office and the government in its anguish granted an indemnity to the Cheyenne and 'Rapahoe survivors of "The Sand Creek Massacre."

Was it a massacre or not? The men who rode with Chivington freely admitted that they took scalps. They also admitted that they killed many women: a volunteer regiment in its baptism of fire doesn't have the knowledge or inclination to discuss who is shooting at them. But as to their enemies being defenseless, the best evidence to the contrary comes from Chivington's despatch carrier, Billy Breakenridge. Billy said the Cheyennes at Sand Creek were better armed and the better fighters; there were not enough of them and they were surprised and even so, it took seven hours of battle for the white men to come out on top. And in later years, this same Billy Breakenridge was sheriff Behan's deputy in Tombstone during the Earp and anti-Earp trouble—and he did not have to leave Arizona when that fracas came to its end in the OK corral, which makes him a character witness for Sand Creek in any book.

The charge is still made that Black Kettle's band was at peace when Chivington struck them. Who made this peace with them? Where are the records of this peace—save in the minds of the warriors themselves who thought they had gulled the white man into another winter of rest and recuperation undisturbed? In the strict military sense, where is any countermanding of Curtis's order to Chivington: *No peace must be made without my direction*? There was one true friendly at Sand Creek that day—Left Hand, with his forty Arapahoe. It was their misfortune to be keeping bad company.

Much has been made of the women and children killed at Sand Creek—and they were killed, as the men who did it admit in their memoirs. But it must also stand in the record that almost four years to the day after Sand Creek, on November 27, 1868, George Armstrong Custer and the 7th Cavalry hit Black Kettle's village on the Washita and killed him before he had a chance to run up his flag—a white one this time. Let it also stand in the record that the Seventh killed women and children in this fight, too, and no one flays their memory for it even though they used captured Cheyenne women in a way that was not practised by the Volunteers who fought with Chivington at Sand Creek.

As for John M. Chivington himself, he left Colorado after his acquittal by the court-martial and lived in California and then in Ohio, his natal state, until 1883. Moving back to Denver in that year, he served for many years as Coroner and Under-Sheriff, dying peacefully in his bed on October 10, 1894.

He comes riding down the trail out of the West That Was as the bloodthirsty megalomaniac butcher of Sand Creek, but Colorado's "Preacher Colonel" was more than that. He was a preacher by trade, a soldier by natural ability, with the build of a blacksmith and a mind ruled by the precepts of the Old Testament. He served his country and his God in the only way that he knew, and to judge him by the conventions of a less forthright, less sincere, less believing society is to do him an injustice.

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RANGER BREED

A Complete Novel

By BOB OBETS

CHAPTER ONE

"Why Did I Leave St. Louis?"

THE WRETCHED LITTLE COACH rattled, jolted, rocked. Moira Birk with a thousand long miles behind her, leaned back and shut her eyes and felt as lonesome as a lost pup. She was tired to her bones, but worry would, not let her relax until she reached Brownsville, down in the tip of Texas, and found out for herself just how bad things were with her brother, Shannon. She wondered dismally if she would ever see St. Louis and her friends again.

Up on the box, Izzy Owenby yelled, "*Hup*, you sons of sin!" and his whip cracked like a pistol shot. The bottom seemed to drop from the stage. Yellow dust moiled up from the floor boards. Moira pitched forward across the knees of the man facing her,

Then the whip cracked again, the four wiry Spanish mules lunged into their collars, and she was flung backward before Roy Killian could catch her. Her head banged against the thinly padded seat-back and she exclaimed:

"Oh, damn this miserable road!"

Killian chuckled. "Damn Zach Taylor along with it. He laid it out—this end of it—before he took his troops into Old Mexico."

A paunchy, well-dressed Mexican who looked like a prosperous merchant sat beside Killian. He murmured, "It was called the Military Road, then; now it is the River Road."

He turned his head to stare out the window, and Moira noticed again the angry scratch on his cheek. Across a hundred yards of silty brown water, in the distance, were low, rolling hills. Moira wondered if, in his mind, Cheno Flores was seeing Taylor's blue-clad soldiers marching toward them.

He asked in his soft voice, "What year was it, señor? I forget,"

"Forty-six," Killian said. "The year the Stars and Stripes went up over the Capitol at Austin. The year I was born—Miss Birk, I hope you're not good at arithmetic."

"Good enough for that, Forty-six from eighty—you're thirty-four. Have you still got your teeth, Mr. Killian?"

He showed them in a rueful smile—teeth strong and white beneath his short black mustache. He was, she thought, a man of striking appearance, with his dark skin and eyes and tall, lithe figure.

He and the portly Mexican had taken the places of two other passengers at Rio Grande City, some eight hours ago. Roy Killian, as he strolled from the

stage station, had reminded her of the black panther she had seen in the St. Louis zoo, He moved in the same easy way. He intrigued her. She wondered what line of work he followed.

"I suppose I asked for that dig, Miss Birk," he was saying. "Now it's my turn. Let's see—old Sam Houston was elected governor, after Texas came into the Union, in 'fifty-nine. That would be about the year you were born. Which makes you twenty-one. Now, in 'sixty-nine, when carpetbaggers were thicker than flies—you were ten years old. Wore your hair in braids, and it was rusty red instead of that bright copper it is—How am I doing, Moira?"

Cheno Flores was shaking his head. "Señor, I will say she was born in the year Cheno Cortinas, my—how you say it?—my *padrino* I was named for, came from across the river to capture Brownsville. Which makes the Señorita Birk now nineteen."

He sat back and smiled, so that his dark, reddish mustache stood in bristles, giving him a roguish appearance.

Killian lit a thin black segar and let blue smoke dribble from his nostrils. "Now if you'd care for a small wager, Cheno—"

The Mexican's eyes brightened, but Moira spoiled it by asking. "How would you settle it? Don't expect any woman to tell her age."

"You must forgive us, Moira. Cheno and I are a little clumsy around women, especially ones as old and decrepit as you are," Killian said solemnly. "But I warn you. I intend to learn a lot about you, if you will permit it. Do you plan to stay long in Brownsville?"

"I—That I don't know. I have a brother there—Shannon Birk; and my uncle owns the newspaper. My father, before he died, ran a small weekly in St. Louis, so I've had some experience. I'm going to stay awhile and help Uncle Paddy with the *Banner*. That is if—Do either of you know my brother?"

"*Si*, I know him well," Cheno Flores said. "I run the small *banco* and one time or two I have lend him money. Shannon *es un joven muy bien*."

Through the upcurling segar smoke Killian's dark eyes seemed to laugh at her. "We'll have to teach you Mexican, Miss Birk. Cheno said your brother is a fine young man. I will add that Shannon is a friend of mine."

"I—I'm glad to hear these things. You see, Shan and I are about all that's left of our family, except for the aunt I've been staying with—and Uncle Paddy. When Uncle Paddy wrote me—I've always heard Texas was such a barbaric place, so naturally I was worried about Shan. I feel better now, except—"

"Except what, Moira?"

"Except," she said with some defiance, "you're wearing a gun under your coat. I saw it when you got the segar."

"Why, Miss Moira—do you mean this gun?"

The long blued-steel weapon was in his hand as if by magic. Then he shrugged and it was back under his coat. He was laughing at her.

"That," Moira gasped, "that's the gun!"

And I've the right to carry it," he assured her. "I happen to be one of our good sheriff's several deputies. Cheno, here, is another one."

"For many years," Cheno said, nodding.

"Guns you'll get used to, my dear. A lot of Texas men pack them, especially here on the Border. I only hope my little dramatics didn't offend you, because I'm still waiting for your permission."

"Permission for what, Mr. Killian?" she asked.

"I want to see you again, Moira. I hope we can become good friends."

She colored a little, but her hazel eyes watched him steadily. "I'm sure we can," she said quietly—"since you're a friend of Shan's."

The stage lurched violently, seemed to lift onto its right wheels as it swerved from the road. For a panicky moment Moira thought surely the coach was going over. Then, with vast relief, she heard Izzy Owenby's profane shout:

"Whoa-up, you crossbred, trace-jumping—" Brake blocks squealed. The stage slowed, stopped.

"Fall out and stretch. Five minutes," Izzy jumped down with a bundle of letters and newspapers under his arm.

"Ranger camp," Killian told Moira. "Want to take a look?"

She was looking. She saw two grayish-white tents and, beside the nearer one, a wagon that had some kind of cupboard attached to the back end. Near the wagon, beneath a big mesquite tree, stood a barrel with a canvas cover, and from branches of the tree hung several saddles, bridles and blankets, a couple of canteens, a lantern, a rifle in a leather scabbard stained almost black. At the base of the tree a big black coffeepot sat on smouldering coals that sent up a long thin curl of smoke.

Two men came from the near tent, the slender one, in an ordinary dark suit with a black string tie, reaching out to take the bundled mail from Izzy. He sent a brief, sharp glance toward the stage, and Moira thought his eyes were the blackest she had ever seen, blacker than even Killian's. His black mustache was longer and silkier than Killian's, and in addition he wore a neatly pointed imperial. That bulge above his hip came from the gun under his coat, Moira told herself with some pride. She was beginning to feel like a native.

She had to strain to make out the man's words: "Passenger for you today, Izzy. In fact, two of them. Lend me a hand, will you?"

He turned and went back into the tent, Izzy followed him. Moira found Killian watching her, his eyes faintly sardonic.

"That was the great Gillett. Captain Dallas Lee Gillett, if you want the whole title. Personally I think he's a publicity hunter, but he has made some big tracks along the lower Rio Grande. Brought in thirteen dead men after one night's haul and laid them out on the plaza, in Brownsville. Put a damper on raiding and rustling for quite a while."

Cheno sighed. "Is true, Mees Birk. *Ai de mi*—two of them was my cousins." He got out a handkerchief and mopped his face.

"Roy! what—"

They had come from the tent, Captain Gillett bearing one end of a canvas-wrapped object, Izzy the other end.

"Where, Izzy? Up in the rack?"

"Rack will do, cap'n."

Moira had her eyes shut. There was a thudding sound above her head, and Izzy said, "That does it!" Moira felt a little sick.

"Something else you'll get used to, Moira," said Killian, and offered his handkerchief.

She shook her head and looked out the window again. She looked square into the piercing eyes of Captain Gillett. He swept off his hat.

"I sincerely beg your forgiveness, young lady. Had I known you were aboard, the scalawag up there could have waited." With a curt nod for Killian, he put his attention on Cheno Flores, who was using the handkerchief again.

"Another of your cousins, I expect, Cheno. Anyhow, he mentioned your name before he—expired. Not expecting, sir, to see you here, I wrote your name on his tag. Just what are you doing here, if I may ask?"

"A business of some cattle, *capitan. El Señor* Killian and I have think to buy these cows from Cruz Blanco, but they was too poor, they was—"

"So you were at Blanco's, near Rio Grande City. You heard the shooting when that *pecador* was killed?"

"No, señor, we was asleep! We was in bed at the Rancho Blanco."

"Let it go, Cheno—but it was you mentioned nighttime; I never. I hope you had pleasant dreams."

He nodded to Moira and turned and she saw another Ranger—she supposed he was a Ranger—approaching with a saddle swinging beside his leg, a bulging canvas bag slung over his shoulder, a roped bedroll under one arm, and bridle and blanket draped over the other arm.

He was a big man, at least six feet tall, strong-boned, solid-looking, with good shoulders and a thick chest that sloped down to lean loins. He wore two six-shooters in holsters swung from crossed shell belts that were bright with brass cartridges. With fully a week's stubble of whiskers covering the lower part of his long-jawed face, he was, Moira thought, the most ruffianly-looking man she had ever seen. She noted with a stab of resentment that the whiskers and the edges of his hair, beneath the black sombrero, exactly matched the color of her own hair, which was bright copper.

He swung the saddle up into the rack, tossed the bedroll and the other items up after it. He stood then facing Captain Gillett, and past the Captain's shoulder Moira could see his eyes. They were unwinking, blue-gray eyes—the color, she imagined, of gunsmoke. They held a steady stare on the Captain's face.

There was something here, a tension Moira could sense without tangible evidence. Killian was aware of it too, for he murmured softly, "What happens here, Cheno?"

"Shhh," Cheno said, and put a finger across his lips.

"Well, Clint," the captain said quietly, "it's been a long time."

"Five years, Dal, this coming May."

"I won't offer to shake hands,"

"No, Dal. No use in being a hypocrite. Well—"

"Where's your saddle gun?"

"Don't worry about that. It's in my bedroll. Well, so long, Dal. We might run across one another some time," and he stepped past the captain.

He had his hand on the door handle when Izzy, who had been listening with his mouth open, blurted, "Hey, Clint, you always ride on top!"

"This one I'm paying for, Izzy, so I'll ride in style. See to my stuff up there, will you? And wake me when we hit Brownsville."

He ducked low, and next moment, with an oddly musical "Excuse me, ma'am," he had stepped between the knees of Killian and Moira and settled in the space beside her. With the heavy guns on his thighs, he took up the whole space.

Moira, feeling that she hardly had

breathing room, sat stiffly and stared at a ragged hole in the pine wood above Killian's head. A bullet hole, she guessed. A bullet hole and a two-gun toter and a dead man on top. *Lord, why did I ever leave St. Louis?*

Izzy Owenby called, "Ever-thin' stowed snug Clint! . . . *Hup-pah!* Take it away, you jackrabbits!" His whip cracked. They started with a jerk that made Moira's neck pop.

Killian was watching her with a faint amusement. He said, "Moira, meet Lieutenant Clint McLain, of the Texas Rangers. Miss Moira Birk, Clint."

Restraining a strong impulse to shrink away from the man, Moira nodded. Clint McLain's smoke-blue eyes, red-rimmed—from drink, she supposed—examined her closely, then he tucked in a corner of his wide mouth and shoved out his hand.

"It is a pleasure, Miss Birk."

Bright-copper hair on the back of the hand and an ugly blood-crusted scratch. Moira thought, *I won't! Thirteen dead men—and I'll bet he killed most of them!* But there was something compelling about Clint McLain—and he kept the hand outstretched. So finally she offered her fingertips. Immediately her hand was enveloped, squeezed—crushed, she suspected.

"It certainly is a pleasure, Miss Moira!" Little wrinkles fanned out from his eye corners. Then Cheno Flores, across from him, cleared his throat, and to Moira's relief he released her hand and he shifted his gaze to the Mexican.

"What was it, Cheno?" he asked after a brief scrutiny. "A cat fight, or a woman?"

"I have my own woman, Señor Cleent," Cheno said with dignity, and went on to explain about the cows that were too poor to buy. "We find these *vacas* in much brosh. This fat old man—" with a doleful shake of his head—"he is not the *vaquero* he was one time ago. *Una espina de mezquite*—" He raked a finger across his face and reached on down for his handkerchief.

"Maybe you ought to try staying at home more, Cheno. With your *mujer* and—how many kids? Seven?" He looked at Killian. "Since when did you boys go pardners?"

"We haven't, McLain. After all, Cheno's business is lending money. He wanted a look at the cows before he made me any loan. Now *I'm* curious." He gestured upward with the segar stub. "What happened last night?"

"Smiley Mason's freight outfit got jumped. That kid driver was killed. Jerry Jones. *Cabrónes* grabbed the wagon they wanted—guns and ammunition for the quartermaster, at Ringgold—and all I bagged was that poor son-of-that *hombre* up on top."

"Tough," Killian said. "But you weren't the only Ranger there?"

"Me and my horse. We was brushed up near the road watching Las Cuevas Crossing. Captain had news of a big raid on Rancho Rincón; him and the boys had a trap set and waiting for me to bring word when they crossed. They crossed, right enough, but they hit Smiley instead of going on to the Rincón. I did what I could," he finished bitterly, "but it wasn't near enough."

"Why so sore, though, Clint? The Rangers and the Cavalry sure don't love each other—and besides, from what I gathered back there at camp—"

"Devil take the Rangers; the Cavalry too! One of those bastards killed my Pancho horse! Dropped him right out from under me. That old horse—I car-

ried biscuits for him in my *alforjas*. By the Grace of God Almighty— I'm sorry, Miss Birk." He pulled out a red-and white bandanna and blew into it with a trumpeting sound.

"I suppose," Killian said, "you never recognized any of them?"

"One—one for certain. I creased one—in the loin, I think. One was a fat *hombre*, about—" He looked again at Cheno Flores. "About your size, Cheno. And one was Polk Jordan. I reckon Hays Jordan was along, too, but I got a good look at Polk. It was him shot my horse."

"Too bad about that," Killian said. "I'd have paid you a flat hundred dollars for that horse."

"You couldn't have paid me a thousand, Killian! Sorry, Miss Moira, for all this ugly talk. Now, if you'll excuse me—"

He leaned back and pulled his hat over his eyes, almost instantly was asleep. Killian watched him for a minute in a thoughtful way, then looked at Moira.

"A violent, dangerous man, Miss Moira. Probably the fastest gunfighter on the Border. I was wondering what he and Dallas Gillett fell out about. Something, I guess, that will never come out—but I'll bet a pretty penny that Clint's brother, Pete, had something to do with it."

"Me," Cheno said sadly, "I was thinking about Polk. *Pobrecito*—an' he owes me two hundred *pesos, americano*."

Izzy's whip cracked and his strident shout came washing back: "You, Christine! Jump to it, by God, or it's no oats for you in Brownsville!"

The coach swayed into a turn and McLain fell against Moira's shoulder and began a gentle snoring. Suddenly her throat ached and she would have given everything she owned to be back in St. Louis.

Chapter Two

The Show-Offs

MOIRA'S FIRST IMPRESSION of Brownsville didn't make her feel better. Small flat-roofed houses of sun-baked brown mud—"adobes," she had learned in Laredo—began to appear. Izzy Owenby, his mules in a headlong run, yelled, "Six o'clock, on the nose! Brownsville, Clint!" A wooden building with a porch and a sign in front flashed by. R. MARTINEZ—SILLERO y ZAPATERO.

"Shoemaker and saddle shop." Killian told her. "Now the reception committee! If they don't show up, you're not welcome."

She was puzzled until she heard barking and saw Killian's delighted smile. He was leaning toward her as the barking swelled to an ear-curdling hullabaloo, and almost shouted, "Haven't had such a turnout since Robert E. Lee came to town! Now you're one of us, Moira."

"Roy, it's awful," she yelled back. Clint McLain kept snoring.

They passed a beautiful black horse with a rider up wearing a black hat flat as a pancake. He was a giant of a man, huge enough to catch anyone's eye, and with enough silver glittering on his short jacket, velvet britches, and enormous spurs to make a person blink. Moira's head turned as he dropped behind, and she saw him stand in the stirrups; glimpsed a mustache and pointed beard so bright red she thought of battle flags. Then dust swirled over him and through the dust came a vengeful shout:

"Izzy, I'll break your bones for this!"

"And he's liable to," Killian said. "That was our friend Clint's daddy, Mike McLain—otherwise known as Red Mike, *El Rojo*, Don Miguel, and a few more things that I wouldn't care to mention. Don Miguel is—quite a character. And quite rich."

"Mees Birk! Look!" Cheno Flores said with pride. "We have reach the main plaza!"

A red hen squawked and went away from the galloping mules, neck stretched and wings flapping; the four or five dogs still chasing the stage barked with renewed vigor. Buildings of brick, wood, adobe were flicking past the window, and Moira saw in front of them men with white faces and men with brown ones, all watching with interest as the coach went careening around the square.

Looking out the other window, Moira saw that they were circling a rather imposing building of two stories, with fruit, vegetables, all sorts of things displayed on the lower floor, and on top a Moorish dome which, she felt certain, housed an old mellow-toned bell.

She began to feel a bit better. Brownsville might prove interesting, after all. Certainly Roy Killian would interest any woman.

He reached across and shook McLain's shoulder. "Clint! We're there."

The man kept his head against Moira's shoulder, but he stopped snoring.

The stage had stopped, Moira realized with something like shock. This was journey's end! She saw bandy-legged Izzy jump down with the look on his face of a man well pleased with himself; saw men and barefoot kids and a few women crowding around the coach, most of them staring up at the rack, some of them staring at her through the open door. Killian, beside the door, was waiting for her.

"Mees Birk, it has been a trip most-*agradable*. Cheno Flores and his wife hope you make their house your home."

The Mexican's courtesy warmed her and she smiled at him, held out her hand; was a bit startled when she felt his lips touch the back of it. "For now, *hasta luego*—until we meet again." He stepped backward from the coach.

Moira glanced down and received her second shock in as many minutes. For McLain's eyes were open, close to hers, bright with interest—the eyes of a killer, she thought.

"Hello, woman," he said, and Moira stiffened. His lips threatened to grin. "Don't mind me, Miss Moira. Out in that chaparral all a man sees is coyotes and jackrabbits—sure no women, no pretty ones. He can dream, though!"

"Moira, are you going to get off?" That was Killian, impatiently.

"Hold your horses," McLain told him. He sat up straight and looked at Moira in a way now entirely sober. "You're Shannon Birk's sister, aren't you?" he asked bluntly.

"I am," Moira said. "Why do you ask?"

"Miss Moira, someday you might need a friend. I'll be around, or else Baldy Magoffin will know where to find me. Baldy's clerk at the Miller Hotel."

"But why? Why would I need—"

"Likely you won't. But just remember—Baldy Magoffin."

He gave her shoulder a little friendly shake and stepped through the door, past Killian. Killian looked a bit ruffled as he reached to take Moira's arm. "Don't let McLain worry you. Anyone could see through that big-brother act!"

"Roy, I'm not so—he seemed sincere."

More confused and perturbed than she cared to admit, she was watching Clint McLain's black sombrero and beautiful shoulders move toward a frame building which, from the sign across its high front, housed I. Ybarra's mercantile, stage station, and undertaking parlor. Moira noticed that the loiterers—waiting, she guessed, for the dead outlaw to be unloaded—were quick to step aside for McLain. He kept moving, shaking his head to their questions.

Killian, still holding her arm, muttered, "Where's that damned Izzy? Ought to handed down your valises before—"

Izzy was coming from the store building, accompanied by Cheno Flores and a tall sallow-faced man—undoubtedly the undertaker, Moira thought. McLain had stopped at the edge of the board walk. He said something to which the sallow-faced man made brief reply, half turning to stare along a line of saddled horses at a rail between the mercantile and the adobe adjacent to it. He jerked his head as if indicating a particular horse, and McLain nodded, stepped up onto the walk.

He took two strides, then came to an abrupt halt. He spoke a single sharp word: "Jordan!"

Two men had come from the adobe through swinging doors something like wings, which flapped shut behind them. They were big tall men with bold high-boned faces adorned with silky yellow mustaches and yellow burnsides. *They look like twins*, Moira, now highly interested, told herself.

"Roy," she whispered excitedly, "is the one with the two guns Polk? Or is that Hays, and the one with the brown hat—"

"Polk with the two guns. Hush up, girl," Killian said curtly, so surprising her that she subsided with an indignant gasp. His fingers bit into her arm and he hustled her alongside the stage, to the back of it. There she turned on him, was fixing to give him a piece of her mind, when the voice of Clint McLain caught her whole attention and pulled her back around.

That odd, deep-toned music was in his voice, solemn music now, almost sad: "Polk Jordan, you killed my horse last night. One of you killed young Jerry Jones, and you killed the best horse I ever owned. Polk, you should have stayed out of town."

He started toward the Jordan brothers, his boots lifting hollow sounds from the pine boards. The cartridges in his crossed belts caught dancing fire from the low, red sun. His long shadow, across the mercantile's front wall, trailed him like a man leaning backward.

The crowd of loiterers had scattered were watching from windows and doors and from around corners. The man looked formidable, merciless, Moira thought with a strange thrill; somehow he looked lonesome.

Polk Jordan called sharply, with a bitter whang to his voice, "McLain, you're talking crazy! I wasn't anywhere near you nor your horse! Hays and me were at home all night! Maw will tell you!"

"So she would, Polk. And it wouldn't be the first time she lied to save your worthless skin. Only this time she won't get the chance."

McLain kept moving, his pace deliberate. Polk Jordan had edged over until he stood just off the walk. Hays waited with his right arm angled out from his body, his elbow almost touching the adobe wall.

"Stop right there, McLain!" he called hoarsely. "You can't drop both of us, McLain!"

"You could keep out of this, Hays, but you won't. So reach when you're ready, unless you want me close enough to scorch you. Beat the devil out of that much fun."

Moira's heart was in her throat, smothering her. "Roy, stop them," she begged. "You're a deputy. They'll kill him!"

"Don't be a fool," Killian said roughly. Then in softer tone: "I couldn't stop it, if—"

Moira never knew exactly what happened. It seemed to her that their hands drove for their guns at the same time. She saw McLain's weapon as a dark-blue blur near his right hip, saw flame spurt, heard a sound like the slamming of a door. Immediately the sound came again, this time from Hays Jordan's gun. She missed the powder flash but saw smoke dribbling from the man's gun as McLain, his body scarcely moving, whipped his weapon around and shot Hays through the right shoulder. Moira was certain of that—the right shoulder—because she saw Hays drop his gun and grab the shoulder with his left hand, then lean against the wall as if he was suddenly sick.

The horses at the rail were plunging and snorting. The stage wheels, with the brakes set, screeched to high heaven as the mules headed for a safer spot. Men crowded out through the swinging doors, six or seven of them—friends of the Jordans, from the ugly glances they cast at McLain.

He stood facing them, his head slightly cocked, the gun he had used already back in holster. He simply waited that way; Moira, watching him, scarcely breathed. Electric tingles played along her spine. *Gunman, killer—the bravest man I've ever seen.* She heard rapid hoofbeats, a trumpeting shout:

"Clint! Why didn't you wait for me? Lord God, if I hadn't stopped for that drink at the Alamo! Scatter, you pig-livered—! Back to your sty! Hi-yah!"

He sent the magnificent black breasting into them. Dancing to right and to left, weight on his hind legs, the black herded the men before him. They stumbled over one another getting back inside, dragging Hays Jordan along with them.

The rider leaned, looked across the swinging doors, and yelled, "And stay in there!"

Clint's father, Red Mike, *El Rojo*, or Don Miguel. "Don Miguel," Moira decided, sounded best.

Killian growled, "Always the show-off—Clint and old Miguel both. Someday Clint's going to jump the wrong man, though, and I hope I'm there to see it."

"You really hate him, don't you, Roy?"

The bitterness of his answer surprised her: "I do and with good reason. Clint McLain killed the best friend I ever had."

"But he isn't a show-off," Moira said, and was somewhat surprised at herself. She felt exhilarated. Her nerves were steady, her mind clear as a bell. She went on with authority: "He has too much courage for a show-off. And he's not a murderer. He could have killed Hays Jordan just as easily as he—plugged him in the shoulder. The right shoulder. Just as easily as he—killed—"

That last look was what did it. She saw Clint McLain staring somberly down at the man he had killed—that loose, undignified shape—and her stomach gave a violent heave. She took a

few uncertain steps away from Killian, and was sick.

"Here, use it," Killian said after a bit, and shoved a handkerchief into her hand. "I ought to be shot for not taking you— but the thing came up so fast—"

"I saw a man k-killed," Moira sniffled. "Oh, this awful p-place!"

"You'll feel better soon. Come along, my dear, I'll take you to your uncle's. Bring your luggage later."

He put his arm across her shoulders and started her southward, away from the plaza and Clint McLain and the sprawled shape with yellow hair that, minutes ago, had been a man.

Chapter Three

Lady of the Press

THE TWO-ROOMED ADOBE was on a squalid street by the river, not far from the plaza. Like most of its neighbors, it faced south, so that from the front door Moira could see a hazy scattering of huts across on the Mexico bank. She could hear dogs yapping, a baby crying: a spotted pig trotted up to her and grunted.

"Devil take you—shoo!" she said. She strained her eyes for sight of Killian, but his tall shape had disappeared in the dusk.

She drew in a deep breath, said "Antietam!" and went inside.

The place was dark, deserted. The air smelled of stale grease, unwashed clothing, and bedding that needed fresh air and sunlight. She made her way to the back room and found some loose matches on a table. She struck one and saw a stack of dirty dishes, a scattered pack of greasy cards, a lamp with a sooty chimney. She lit the lamp and gazed around her.

Essentially a tidy person, she felt herself getting sick again. The cookstove stood on three legs, an upended box serving for the fourth one, pot and skillet on top of the stove sour with moldy biscuits and fermenting beans, the lidless pan in front overflowing with ashes.

On a shelf beside the stove she saw limp sacks of coffee, flour and such, and three empty quart whisky bottles. She counted four more empties on the packed-earth floor, along with cigarette butts, struck matches, a cast-off spur, a dirty sock. She went back into the front room, slumped down on a wall bunk and silently wept.

She sat that way, shoulders shaking, for perhaps five minutes. Then, like a cold teakettle coming to the boil, something deep inside her began to warm, to simmer, finally to dance with angry energy. She jumped up and stared wrathfully across at the other bunk.

"Look at you! Dirty, filthy—you and this whole house! You and this whole town! Well, you listen to me! I'm going to clean you up. I'm going to clean the town up. If there's any power in the press, I'm going to bring some law to Brownsville! And if Shannon—If he's keeping bad company, gambling, drinking—I'll straighten that young pup out in short order! Yes, and Uncle Paddy too, if he ever comes—"

She stopped and turned, listening intently. She could see through the kitchen. The back door was closed but not barred. And someone—

It's only Uncle Paddy, she assured herself—*or Roy with my bags. Or maybe it's Shannon! . . . But it sounds like two horses.*

The hoof sounds stopped. Leather squeaked as someone dismounted. A

voice that was too deep for Shannon's called, "Paddy, open up!"

Moira ran on tiptoe into the kitchen, cast about wildly for a weapon. She stooped and came up with a length of stovewood.

"Mesquite," she muttered. "Only thing grows in this miserable land!"

"Paddy, are you drunk? Open the door!"

Moira, panting, was beside the door, the stick of stovewood up and ready.

"Easy, son, easy . . . Here we *are!*"

A booted foot sent the door swinging inward. A dusty brown sombrero, the face beneath it in shadow, and a shoulder covered by faded khaki canvas slid into Moira's view. She thought, *Brown hat—Hays Jordan!* and her muscles acted as reflex. She laid the stovewood club square across the brown hat's crown.

"There!" Moira said, and stepped back to watch the creature fall. When he didn't, only stood swaying, she raised the club again. Then she saw that he had his arm around a more slender man who, it was obvious, was in bad shape.

His head was hanging so low it was a wonder his hat didn't fall off—a gray hat, Moira noted. Broad-brimmed, of course. And on the front of his short canvas jacket was a dark, damp stain. The strong, not unpleasant odor of whisky came in Moira's nostrils.

"Drunk!" she exclaimed. "A pair of drunken brawlers!"

"No, ma'am. Now, if you'll stand aside—"

The man she had clubbed was staring straight at her. A big six-shooter seemed to have sprouted from his fist. He motioned with it.

"Move, woman!"

His voice, his face—that slight cleft in the chin, the steady, unwinking eyes. The family resemblance was strong.

"You're Clint's brother! You're Pete McLain."

"I admit it, ma'am. And I don't give a hoot who you are! Where is Paddy?"

He took a step toward her, moving his friend with him. He looked determined.

Moira, more angry now than frightened, was remembering what Killian had said—that Pete, he would bet a pretty penny, had caused the trouble between Clint and Captain Gillett.

"I'm Moira Birk—Paddy's niece, from St. Louis," she told Pete. "That, however has got nothing to do with you and your—sick friend. You're not coming in here."

"We're not, Miss Moira?" Softly, a myriad small wrinkles springing out from his eye corners—for all the world like Clint. "I did what I could, but that slug caught him under the short ribs. Without better attention, Shannon might—get worse."

"*Shannon? Oh, no!*"

Pete's gun was back in holster. He reached across and gently lifted the wounded man's head. "Shannon, Miss Moira."

She took one look. Once more she said, "Oh, no!" Then she said, "Antietam! Dammit, Antietam!" and pulled herself around, went to the table and lifted the lamp.

"Bring him in the front room, Pete. Then ride for a doctor. I'll start the hot water." Her jaw was set, her shoulders squared.

THE DOCTOR HAD ALREADY GONE. He had cleaned and dressed the wound, left some capsules for the fever, and assured Moira that what Shannon needed most was sleep. Now Shannon was

sleeping and Moira was not so worried about the injury to his strong, young body; but the old worry that had started with the letter from Paddy Birk was back now to plague her worse than ever. She was afraid that Shannon had received a hurt far deeper and more lasting than the bullet wound.

"*One I creased—in the loin, I think,*" Clint McLain had told Killian—and Shannon's wound was in the loin. Then there was Pete's glib answer to Doctor Herrera's casual question:

"It come up over Maria Sandoval. You know her Doc—that pretty singer down at Concha's place. Always playing games, one man against the other, and this time it was Shannon and some *mustachioed* rooster from across the river. Shan threatened to cut his comb and when we went out to our horses, the damn *gallo de riña* shot Shan. Shot from the brush and struck a high lope for Mexico. I do' no' whether I hit him. Anyhow, he never stopped."

Doctor Herrera hadn't believed that story, Moira was certain. Neither did she. It was too pat. And the wound wasn't a fresh one; anyone could see that. They had waited until Shannon was burning with fever, out of his head, before Pete had brought him in to see a doctor—so the shooting could have occurred at some place farther away than Concha's, which, Moira had gathered, was only a few miles downriver. Shannon could have got the wound near Rio Grande City.

From her chair, beside Shannon, Moira looked across at Pete, asleep on the other bunk. She wanted to ask him some questions—but not now, she decided. Let him sleep.

What was it Señor Flores had said about Shannon—that he was a fine young man? And Killian had said Shannon was his friend. A banker and a deputy sheriff—it was a pity, Moira scolded herself, that his own sister was so quick to doubt him!

Why, though, if Shannon wasn't headed for trouble, had Clint McLain told her to look him up if she ever needed a friend? She simply didn't know. Only one thing—she was going to get the truth out of somebody around here!

Someone knocking on the door. She got up and stood for a moment, fighting off a queer, light-headed feeling, wondering dully how long it had been since she had really slept.

"Moira, are you in bed?"

She remembered answering, opening the door, seeing his tall, lean shape in starlight.

"Moira," he had said, "I fetched your —Moira! what's wrong?"

"Shannon—everything! Roy, oh, Roy, I'm so glad you've come!"

Then she thought she had stumbled; she remembered his arms reaching for her, and, until now, nothing more.

She was on the bunk where Pete had been sleeping—only a minute ago, it seemed. But now bright sunlight was pouring in the east window, spilling across Shannon's bunk, filling the room.

Shannon! She sat bolt upright so she could see him better. He surprised her with a faint grin.

"Hello, sis. You got a hell of a reception, didn't you? Look plumb peart, though, in that lacy night outfit. Roy didn't get it on hind part before?"

"Roy?" She looked down, saw the warm skin of her breasts beneath pale-blue lace, and blushed. Then she wrinkled her nose and sniffed. "Bacon! And eggs frying! And coffee! Shannon who—"

"Roy," Shannon said. "He's been here all night. Rousted Pete out and made him sleep on a pallet. Got you undressed and that gown on—Don't blush so hard, sis! It was dark."

Feeling hot clear to her toes, she changed the subject. "Uncle Paddy—where do you suppose he is, Shan?"

"In there with Pete and Roy. He came rocking in about midnight, looking like a wet dog. Cussing Clint one breath and crying the next. His poor little orphan niece, nobody to bid her welcome. It seems Clint found him in the Alamo, dunked him in the horse trough."

"That—that bully! That show-off! Wait till I see him! But right now I'm hungry enough to eat a Texas coyote."

She bounced from the bunk, went over and kissed Shannon on his unshaved cheek. He looked much better this morning. The whole world looked better—thanks in large measure to Roy Killian. He was thoughtful and kind.

Rummaging through her valises for the green challis—the dress that went so well with her copper-red hair—she went over in her mind the annihilating blast she intended to fire at the local citizens, at the lawless element in general, and at one high-handed gentleman in particular on the front page of the *Banner*. She was going to open some eyes! Something like this, to start with:

Last Thursday evening the famous (or is it infamous?) gun-fighter, Clint McLain, seriously wounded Hays Jordan and shot Polk Jordan to death in front of Ybarra's Mercantile. A crowd of about thirty horrified men, women, and children witnessed the sordid affair. The efficient Mr. McLain fired only two shots, one taking effect in Hays Jordan's right shoulder, the other . . .

Holding the dress up against her body, she began whistling *Yankee Doodle;* was interrupted by Killian's cheerful yell: "Come a-running, gal, or I'll throw it to the dogs. Breakfast!"

Some two hours later she was sitting behind Paddy Birk's cluttered desk in a cramped two-roomed adobe on Elizabeth, which was the town's main street. That way, the pencil between her teeth suggesting whiskers, she resembled somewhat a self-satisfied mouser eyeing the reward her own initiative had brought her. She was, in other words, rereading what she had just written:

There is considerable reason to believe that McLain is no longer with the Texas Rangers. A corroborating statement to that effect will no doubt be secured from Captain Gillett, but in anticipation of such statement your reporter here repeats, verbatim, a conversation overheard between Captain Gillett and McLain at the Ranger camp, shortly before the shooting:

Gillett; "Well, McLain, it's been a long time."

McLain: "Too long. I've been with your outfit five years, this coming May."

Gillett: "I won't offer to shake hands."

McLain: "No, Gillett, I'd advise you not to. I'd take it as a hypocrite's gesture."

Gillett: "Where's your saddle gun, then? No use in you coming back for anything."

McLain: "It's in my bedroll. Don't worry about that. I wouldn't leave that old gun. Not anywhere. Well, Gillett—" (Here, your reporter observed, his smoke-blue eyes glittered fiercely.) "I hope we run into each other again, Gillet. I'll be watching for you."

As lithe as a puma, he stepped past the captain and boarded the stage. On the stage he was taciturn, grim. About an hour later he got off the stage in front of the Mercantile, obviously in a dangerous humor. The "puma" was ready for the kill. At that inopportune moment, as fate would have it, the Jordan brothers emerged from the Silver Dollar Saloon. McLain accosted them and, after a few taunts, opened fire.

The results of this violent pistoletazo's *actions have already been told. What hasn't been told is the why. Clint McLain killed one Brownsville citizen and almost killed another one—all because of an ordinary, run-of-the-corral saddle horse, worth at most a hundred dollars!*

Citizens of Brownsville, this reporter asks you: Is a man's life worth no more than that? Is life held so cheap in your community that your life or your neighbor's can be taken by any killer who wears a gun? Will the "law" do anything about this killing—or about any killing? It is your duty to see that there is law, to demand that there be law, and that those who break it are punished.

Wake up, Citizens of Brownsville! Before it is too late, wake up!

Moira sat back and smiled. That "*pistoletazo*" particularly pleased her. According to the bright-eyed Mexican lad she had found in the shop, that one word meant "*hombre* who esshoot the *pistola muy bien*—like Señor Cleent." And he had gone on to introduce himself as Chaco Robles, "*un diablo del impresor*—one preenter's devil."

Now she heard light, quick footsteps come from the back room, which contained the ancient press and other meager equipment. The steps stopped behind her. She waited a reasonable time—long enough for him to read both pages—then asked, "How does it sound, Chaco?"

"Why, it sounds just dandy, Miss Moira. Except maybe you forgot that ordinary, run-of-the-corral saddle horse's name. It was Pancho. Then you forgot to put that I called Gillett a damned hypocrite, then growled—"

She was up and around, glaring at him. "Clint McLain, what do you want here? Sneaking up behind my back!"

"Ma'am, I expect it's the coyote in me," he said solemnly. "Coyotes is the curiousest, sneakin'est—pair of 'em stole my boots one night. Ever since, I been called 'Coyote' McLain. Use that name in your article, Miss Moira. I'm sort of proud of it."

"I will say the name fits!" Moira snapped. "Now, if that's all of your droll witticisms, I'll get back to work."

"Now that reminds me why I came in the back way, ma'am. Front door's usually locked this early, so I aimed to leave my ad. with Chaco. Then I saw you in here, workin', and—by the way, how is Uncle Paddy this morning?"

"Sniffling," Moira said. "It's not your fault he hasn't got pneumonia. You ought to be proud of yourself! An old man who won't weigh a hundred pounds with—"

"His boots on, ma'am? Soaking wet?"

"Yes! No! Clint McLain, what did Uncle Paddy ever do to you?"

"Hmm'm. Now that—I guess it's just when I like a man I like him, but a loud gruntin' old *verraco* like—ah, well. I'm glad I never drowned him. About that ad. now. Paper still comes out tomorrow, on Saturday, don't it? You never changed that?"

"Mister McLain, if you really have

an ad. let's have it. Any ad. of yours, I might not—"

"Oh, you'll run it. Somewhere deep down, I believe you have a kind heart. And you see, this here's sort of a want ad.—aimed at getting me another job."

"Then you *have* left the Ranger service?"

"Not—exactly"—looking down at his boots. "I hate to admit it—and I know you won't print what I'm telling you, in confidence—but Gillett fired me, damn his soul. After all I done for him! Why, I've killed men—betrayed my friends—Miss Moira, I'd hate to tell you all I've done for the Rangers."

"Will you tell me why Gillett fired you—what grounds he had?" Her eyes were gleaming like a huntsman's with game in sight. She murmured, "In confidence, of course."

"W-e-l-l—in confidence—it was account of my brother, Pete. A bunch around here has been stealing cows, robbin' stagecoaches—all sorts of devilment. Like Smiley Mason's wagons, the other night. Some of 'em live across the river, some on this side. The Jordans and my brother, Pete. Oh, yes, that's what Gillett thinks! He thinks Pete is more than a wild kid. So after that little fracas, when Smiley told Cap'n Gillett he saw me empty both guns, only drop one man, why—"

"Gillett fired you. And I can't say that I blame him. A gunfighter of—of your caliber missing with eleven shots."

"Only with ten, ma'am. I creased another one, you remember. And if I do say so, the moonlight was plumb shifty for sharp gunwork. The main thing, though, I reckon I was scared Pete *might* be with those *malvadores*. That influenced me some. Anyhow, that's the way Gillett looked at it. He even intimated I might have tipped Pete off and he passed the word on that Smiley was due with a wagonload of guns. That's when I cussed Gillett! When I decided if a pot's got the name it might as well have the game—go ahead and be black. So if you'll take my ad.—"

"Mr. McLain. *Was* Pete with those—*malvadores?*"

"No, ma'am! At least, I never spotted him. Pete's not wild enough to run with that bunch."

"What—sort of looking fellow was the one you creased? Was he slender? Was he wearing a big gray hat?"

"It was big enough, all right—but gray? Miss Moira, you can't tell color much by moonlight. I'd say his hat was —sort of dove-wing blue. And he was a big *hombre*, like I told Cheno Flores—about his size." His eye corners suddenly crinkled. "A man might think you knew one of 'em, ma'am."

"Of course not!" she said hastily. "I'm a reporter. I wanted his description for my story. I—oh, let's have that ad."

She had forgotten for the moment her resolute plans concerning the man and his future—which, if the Press was powerful enough, certainly would be gunless, if a sizeable chunk of it wasn't spent behind bars. She intended to make an example of Clint McLain which would alienate his gun-slinging friends and influence the good people for miles around. Right now, though, she felt almost friendly toward him for bringing her near to peace of mind.

Shannon wasn't with those outlaws, nor was Pete, or surely Clint would have seen them. She felt so much better that she smiled at him.

He smiled back at her, and she found herself thinking, *What a difference clean clothes, a shave, and a haircut*

can make! She turned back to the desk, the image of him lingering in her mind. Not as handsome a man as Killian, she decided, but there was something about his face, its strong bone structure, its compelling eyes—the face of a fighting man.

She said, "I'm waiting, Mr. McLain."

He put his big hands flat on the desk. Thought wrinkles came between his eyes. "Mmm'mm, try this: 'Footloose man, single, twenty-five, good with horses, cows, and guns, wants connection with right party that will bring in some quick cash returns. Anyone interested contact Clinton A. McLain in next few days, at Miller Hotel.' How does that sound, Miss Moira?"

"I won't print such a thing," Moira declared. " 'Good with guns!' What's the *A* for—'Assassin,' "?

"No, ma'am—for 'Archibald,' " he told her gravely. "It means 'nobly bold.' "

He stacked five silver *pesos* on the desk, turned, and had reached the door when he looked back and gave her a quizzical stare.

"Do you want a real story—a bang-up good story?"

Her eyes came alight with interest. "I always want a good story. What about?"

"Would you be willing to go with me tonight, about eight, across to Matamoros?"

"I—might. If the story was good enough. I'd have to know something—"

"Nope. You got to take it on pure speculation—have faith in me, so to speak. You know I wouldn't let anything happen to you until you finish my—biography. What do you say?"

Mexico! Bull fights and whispering guitars, bandits with spiked mustaches, women with daggers in their garters and flowers in their hair. Back in St. Louis she'd be the lion of every party! "*A killer, my dear? In Texas? With only five notches on his guns? Certainly he wears two of them. All the time. And believe me, men step aside for Clint McLain. The night he took me across the Rio Grande*—"

"Well, Miss Moira?"

"Antietam!" Moira said fiercely.

"What was that? You're not cussing me, by any chance?"

"No." She drew a deep breath. "I'll take it! Probably I'll cuss you later, but I'll go with you."

"Good girl! Pick you up at eight, then—and don't forget the ad. I need a job."

A job, he said! She needed a new head! What in the dear name of God had she let herself in for?

Chapter Four

Across the Rio Grande

SHE DIDN'T GET much work done the rest of the morning. When, about noon, Roy Killian strolled in and asked if she'd like to try a Mexican dinner, she went with him gladly. In a patio she tried such peppery dishes as *chili con frijoles* and *tacos*, her mind all the while worrying about her promise to McLain. She could still back out. After all, she hardly knew the man and she had Shannon to think about.

As if reading her mind, Killian said, "Shannon's much better. I just went by to see him. Had his dinner sent to him, and—no, don't thank me. I was thinking mostly of myself. Without Shannon to worry about, you'll have more time for me."

"But I do thank you, Roy—and—and there's something I want to ask you."

He listened attentively while she told him about her talk with McLain. "It

surprised me so when he asked me to go to Matamoros," she finished, "that I—I hardly knew what to say. Roy, do you think it would be all right?"

He brought out one of his thin black segars, took his time about lighting it. Then he said slowly, "Well, you know how I feel about the man. But that's no reason you should let the chance for a good story slide by. I believe I'd go with him, Moira."

"With a gunman, Roy? The way he's heading, he'll be an outlaw, yet you say—"

"And if you were ten years younger, you'd be pouting at me," he said, smiling. "Moira, my dear, let me tell you a bit about the McLains then you can make your own decision."

He drew on the segar, exhaled slowly. Through the lifting smoke, his dark eyes seemed hypnotic.

"The McLains," he began abruptly, "are men who live for adventure, for violence. A few decades ago they would've made first-rate buccaneers. Old Don Miguel—he's sixty, though he doesn't look it—has fought in three wars. He was with Sam Houston at San Jacinto when he was sixteen. Before he turned thirty he was at Monterrey, fighting this time on the Mexican side in a war he's still bitter about. He claims—with some justification—that all the land south of the Nueces should still belong to Mexico.

"Anyhow, some eleven years after the *coronel* came home, his wife died in childbirth—that was Pete. Clint was about four—just graduating from whittled mesquite to a cap-and-ball thirty-eight. With old Don Miguel for his teacher, they say that by the time he was six, Clint could hit—Moira, I'm not boring you?"

"No, Roy! Please go on."

"Well, old Miguel took the loss of his wife hard, and shortly he went back to Mexico. Left the boys with his *major-domo,* Blas Chavez, who's still his ranch foreman. This time he stayed two years, and if you listen to folks around here, they were years crammed with mysterious intrigues and high adventures. You can imagine yourself how much color ten pack-mule loads of gold would add to any story. Then, when you add to the gold a beautiful woman—a girl, rather—why, you have all the material for a legend. That's what Don Miguel has become."

"And the beautiful woman?" Moira prompted him. "What became of her? Was she his wife?"

"Shhh—my dear, don't even whisper such a question! Old Miguel worships Doña Catalina. Every *vaquero* on the ranch does, not forgetting Pete and Clint, who seldom stick around there. Doña Catalina is much younger than Miguel, still beautiful, and she runs El Rancho Del Sol with an iron hand and a velvet voice."

"When the old warhorse left her—joined Hood's Texas Brigade, in the last days of the Rebellion—she like to grieved herself to death. I'll take you out to meet her some afternoon. It's a pleasant drive downriver, and the Del Sol is the show place of the whole country."

"I'd love that Roy, . . . I think I understand Clint better now. A father like Don Miguel. Shooting a pistol when he was four years old. Then joining the Texas Rangers, making such a—such an awesome reputation with—"

"Then," Killian said dryly, "getting himself fired."

"That wasn't his fault. He got fired on Pete's account. Because he was

afraid Pete was with those—*malvadores*. I think that's to his credit, Roy, no matter what Captain Gillett thinks!"

Killian, behind her, was pulling back her chair.

"You're right interested in Clint McLain, aren't you?"

"Any woman would be—any woman not used to such men. I think I'm a little afraid of him."

They walked back in silence, after that; were at the shop's front door when Killian asked, "And what have you decided about tonight?"

"Roy, a man who loves his stepmother, a man with the courage of lions—I'm going to Matamoros with him."

"Whoa now, no one mentioned lions—and you're not any stepmother. However, I expect McLain will be so wrapped up in whatever's taking him to Matamoros that he won't notice how lovely you are. You say he never mentioned what it was?"

"No," she said. "Roy, I enjoyed the dinner. Also the company."

His handsome eyes gleamed with pleasure. "You honor me," he murmured. "You'll be all right with McLain, too. I'll see to that."

He went on across toward the Alamo, leaving her faintly frowning. What, she wondered, did he intend to do? Talk to Clint? She remembered the words "in confidence" with a little sharp prick of conscience.

Killian, in front of the saloon, was saying something to a man she recognized—Hays Jordan. Jordan nodded and his yellow mustache reminded her of Missouri sunflowers bobbing in the wind. She went on inside and saw the brown face of Chaco Robles grinning at her.

"You like him Mees Moira? It is not good. Someday, I think for sure, Señor Cleent will esshoot him dead."

"And someday, I think for sure, I will fire one preenter's devil! Get back to work. *Vam—vamoose!*"

She sat down at the desk, wondering what Killian had talked to Hays Jordan about, wondering what this night would hold for a greenhorn from St. Louis.

CLINT CAME BY FOR HER promptly at eight. In her best dress, the rose-silk with the puffed sleeves, a cameo lavalier gleaming in the hollow of her throat, and with a daring touch of color added to her full lips, she hadn't long to wait before Killian's guess was proved wrong.

For before he helped her into the buggy, Clint took both her arms, stared down at her and said gravely, "I never saw anyone so pretty. You make me feel proud, Miss Moira."

"Then I'm glad," she said, and strangely enough she was until she began wondering if his fine black broadcloth coat concealed a gun.

She wondered, too, how they were going to get across all that ugly brown water, she wondered in silence as Clint drove up the street and, after a few blocks, turned left and stopped beside a clutter of other buggies and saddled horses. A barefoot Mexican lad trotted up.

"Watch you boggy, señor? I watch him—*aiee*, Señor Cleent!"

"Watch him good, *chamaco*," and he flipped the boy a coin.

He slid his arm beneath Moira's and his big hand squeezed hers, enfolded it. That way, like lovers, they strolled along a board walk, toward the river.

There was a moon. Leaves of orange trees and oleanders made a susurrus of

sound. Small stalls flanked the walk on either side, their offerings so varied, so colorful that Moira was both intrigued and amazed. You could buy candy made from prickly pear, hand-carved clocks, spectacles, chickens that cackled, parrots that spoke Spanish; you could have your health examined, your fortune told.

This was fun! When a fat woman in a red-and-green dress smiled at Clint, murmured, "Make you will? Get you marry, señor?" Moira giggled like a schoolgirl. Clint smiled down at her.

He seems so different, she thought. *And it's not just the broadcloth and white linen. He's so at ease—would be no matter what faced him. And he's so—commanding. He'd make the men I know in St. Louis look insignificant.*

A pretty girl in the last booth, her eyes so black they must have been lacquered, was looking Clint over from sombrero to boots. Smiling at him. Holding up a gay-colored scarf.

"*Una mantilla, señor? Por la señorita?*"

"No, Clint—" Moira shook her head.

" 'No'? To a green-loving Irishman?" He was placing the *mantilla* around her shoulders. "See? it goes good with your sorrel hair. I've got a bright sorrel at the ranch I'll give you. If you don't ride, you can borrow some of his mane and tail, make you one of them switches."

He turned back to pay the girl and as he reached in his pocket, she leaned toward him, whispered something in intense Mexican. One word sounded like "*queedow.*" Moira didn't like its sound, nor the way the girl clutched Clint's arm.

She said, "The *mantilla* is lovely, Clint. But I'm afraid I'm making you late for your appointment."

The girl was looking at Clint with her whole heart in her eyes. This time without sound, her lips formed the word "*Queedow.*"

"I will, don't you worry, Lupe *chiquita,*" Clint said easily, as they moved away.

"I want to know something," Moira said. "Clint, did you study Spanish, or just pick it up?"

"Both—and it's Mexican. I learned it from the *vaqueros,* the cook, the housekeeper; from my father and Doña Catalina, God love her. It was her insisted I go to Mexico City."

"You went to school in Mexico City?"

"Let's say my name was on the books. For two years, at the University of Mexico. I met some pretty girls, learned that *tequila* is the best drink, then, to fill out my extracurricular activities"—his boyish grin surprised her—"I learned how to throw a knife, how to tie the gaffs on a gamecock, and where and how to stick a bull without him sticking you. Catalina was some put out with me, but Don Miguel took my learnin' right proud—until I joined the Rangers."

"He didn't like that? I would have thought—"

"No," Clint said, the grin entirely gone. "Miguel wanted to break me in so someday I could run the Del Sol the way he wants it run. And when anybody crosses Don Miguel—Miss Moira, you ought to make your mark in the newspaper business; you're a good listener. Here's the ferry."

"Good," Moira said absently. "Clint, what does '*queedow*' mean?"

"Border lingo for '*quidado.*' Means 'take care, watch out.' Now where did you hear that word?"

"Where I heard a pretty girl called '*chiquita*', which I happen to know

means 'little girl'—in the endearing sense! Come on; what are we supposed to be careful about?"

"Having too much imagination," he said. "Into the ferry, woman; you ask too many questions."

The ferry looked to Moira like an ordinary skiff. She eyed the sorry craft, the swirling water, muttered, "Antietam!" and stepped aboard. Once out on the water, though, she had to admit that the Rio Grande was beautiful at night.

Moon magic, she thought, and was grateful for the scarf around her shoulders; the breeze coming *off* the river was cool. The ferryman had made change for Clint from a pile of silver on the seat beside him, and now Clint was questioning him—in Mexican, of course.

The Mexican's reply included gestures. Moira thought sure he was going to lose the oars. Then she heard one word, a name, that had meaning for her.

"What is he saying, Clint?" she asked sharply.

"Why, just that the ferry business has been right brisk tonight, and—Ain't the moon pretty a-hanging yonder?"

"All it reminds me of is Hays Jordan's mustache," Moira said grumpily.

On the Mexican bank Clint hired a hack. Towed by a bony-hipped mare, they rattled away from the scattering of huts beside the river, followed a spine-jolting road for a couple of miles, and began to see more houses—most of them dark—and to hear more dogs—most of them vociferous.

Clint had said scarcely a word since they left the river. Moira wondered if he was worried about Hays Jordan, about anything. Who was he here to see? Why?

"Clint," she said, "now is the time for you to speak up. Tell me something, Clint."

"It means 'be careful.' I been being careful for five years. What I'm curious about: how did that son find out?"

He gave her a suspicious look—she thought. Or was that just her guilty conscience? She said hastily, "If you mean Hays Jordan, that wasn't what I meant. Why are we here, is what I meant. Where's my story?"

"Where I'm taking you," he said. Then he said something to the driver, and muttered, "I just wonder—" Afterward he sat in silence. Sulking, she guessed.

The houses now were larger, set flush with the street. Lighted lamps were bracketed above some of the doors. Moira saw people on the narrow stone walks and inside some of the buildings; saw a few hacks and saddle horses at the rails, heard a wild yell.

An exciting picture took shape in her mind: A lovely girl—well, she'd been called lovely—sitting across from her broad-shouldered escort, every man in the place watching her, wondering who she could be, while guitars and mandolins made soft music and a handsome Latin in evening clothes and scarlet cummerbund came over, bowed from the waist, and asked if he might have the pleasure.

"Why, certainly, Señor Amontillado," and Moira smiled graciously at the moon-faced hack driver, who had turned his head to stare at her. "It would be a pleasure to dance with you!"

"Damned if it wouldn't," Clint growled. "*A la derecha,* Gordo!" he called to the driver. "Whip it up some!"

"*Hoo, perezosa! Andále!*" The long buggy whip swished. They wheeled right, around a corner, and went

bouncing down a dark side street with Clint, one knee on the seat, peering back through the yellow haze of dust and moonlight.

Moira had both knees on the seat; her hands were gripping the back of it, her eyes straining.

"Clint! What is it? I can't see—"

"*A la izquierda!*" Clint yelled; and Moira was thrown against him as the fat Mexican pulled his laboring nag into a forty-five-degree left turn. When she opened her eyes, she was again facing forward. Dark buildings were pressing in so close on either side that she thought, for a moment, they were boring through a tunnel.

"*Que pasa?*" the driver shouted.

"Hack trailing us," Clint shouted back.

"Then, for God's sake," Moira shouted, louder than either of them, "can't we go faster?"

"*Adelante, cochero!*"

"*Como las alas del alcatraz!*"

His whip cut the air. The hack leaped. Moira yelled, "Devil take your Mexican talk! What did he say?"

"We're going to fly," Clint yelled back. "With the wings of a pelican! Don't worry! Would you care to dance?"

She swung to face him, intending to scorch him proper; but the coach lurched into another turn. Next moment she was sprawled against Clint. His arms went around her—then tightened. The pressure against her lips was—why, it seemed—it should have been tried—*Well, you're a coward if you stop now!*

Clint was no coward. He kissed her long and earnestly; and she found herself kissing him back. What had come over her?

She pushed against his chest. Immediately he released her. "I'm sorry, Miss Moira. I took advantage of you. I had no right."

He said to the driver, in plain English, "Sharp, now, Gordo. That spread-out pink adobe with the walled courtyard—there, see where you turn under those banana trees? Not much road, but you can follow the wall on around to the back gate."

The twisting and turning had confused Moira, but now she saw the riverbank just ahead. The pink adobe looked lonesome, deserted. No light showed in the small, barred windows. Not a single dog barked at the visitors. Where was that turnoff?

Gordo snarled, "*Aquí, palabrota!*" and pulled the mare into a right turn that took them straight away from the goat-trail road they had been following. Deep shadow engulfed them. A trailing leaf brushed Moira's cheek and she jerked away from it, almost cried out. Clint's voice was a round whisper in blue darkness:

"You scared?"

"N-not a bit!"

"Good! For a minute, you had me fooled."

Moira's heart was slugging her ribs. Her tongue had turned to cotton. Her eyes began to sting, her throat to hurt.

Then Clint's arm went around her shoulders, pulled her against him, gently. "There," he said, "it's all right. Everything's all right, except me, and I'm a damned fool for bringing you here. But I'll get you back safe—with a good story, too. Are you still frightened?"

"No," she said, "not much." And that was gospel truth. There was something comforting, reassuring about Clint McLain. Surely he couldn't be—too bad.

The hack had stopped. Clint stepped

down, said, "Wait here, Gordo." Then, instead of offering his hand, he reached up and lifted Moira from the hack—"In case your knees are acting up"—and he was carrying her toward an arched gate, a door, really, set in the courtyard wall.

When he put her down she shut her eyes tight and knew how young Jack must have felt climbing the beanstalk. Beyond that gate, what would she find? An ogre—the giant who played a harp? Or the hen that laid golden eggs?

Chapter Five

News for the Banner

IN THE COURTYARD, Clint took her hand and led her along a path shadowed by bushes and trees and vines. She smelled eucalyptus and honeysuckle; a rush of wings past her head sent her shrinking against Clint, seeking the solid strength of him. Save for that unseen flying thing, she heard nothing move. She shivered.

Then suddenly they were in moonlight, crossing smooth flagstones, and ahead of them, at a table beside the rear wall of the house, Moira saw a young woman with burnished black hair sitting opposite three small boys, one of whom was waving his hand in a way familiar to Moira. A lamp hanging from a beam above them showed her the scene in soft light, and she thought, *Why they're having school!* She was so surprised, so relieved, that she wanted to laugh out loud.

At the head of the table sat a man with hair and beard iron-gray, as near as Moira could make out. She heard him chuckle at something one of the boys had said. The smallest boy's hand shot upward.

"Very well, Pedrocito," the young woman said. "But remember—no Mexican." The excited youngster began to bounce.

"Was one time *cuatro conejos* name Flops, Mops, Cola Algodon, y Pedrocito, wheech was *un conejo muy, muy malo,* the wors' robbit—"

The young woman rose with a glad cry, came rushing around the table and caught Clint in a fond embrace. The three boys cried, "*Tío* Clint, *Tío* Clint!" and the gray-bearded man left his chair, embraced Clint, and kissed him on both cheeks.

Then they all were smiling at Moira while Clint made introductions. The man—Moira's idea of what a grandee should look lie—was Señor Don Jaime Guiterrez; the young woman, Don Jaime's daughter-in-law, was Señora Carlota Guiterrez; and the three boys were her sons.

The family made their guests welcome. Don Jaime seated Moira to the right of his own chair, summoned a manservant, and shortly the table gleamed with silver bowls of nutmeats and confections, crystal glassware and wire-netted bottles of wines. Clint smiled across at Moira while Don Jaime filled their glasses and the beautiful Carlota, beside Clint, worshiped him with her eyes.

"Do not mind me," she told Moira. "I have adopted this neglectful one when he was—so high"—and she put her hand on the head of Pedrocito, who had squeezed in between her and Clint.

It was all wonderful to Moira, this family, everything. Only—where was her story? As if sensing her thoughts, Clint murmured, "Patience. Remember, you're in *mañana*—"

That was when, past Clint's shoulder, she saw the giant, the monster with two heads, one above the other. She

started up from her chair. Then the monster reached the end of the path, was in moonlight, and the bottom head, she saw, belonged to a man half as wide as he was tall. A man who, at sight of her, reacted in a way most surprising.

"Mees Birk! What an unexpected pleasure!"

"Señor Flores! Yes—yes, it was unexpected, wasn't it?"

Clint, missing none of this, chuckled heartily.

Carlota was kissing the tall young man who had been trailing Cheno Flores on the narrow pathway, and the three boys were hugging his legs, making happy sounds.

Monster! Moira thought, and felt like an idiot. He was Marcos, of course—the handsome husband Carlota had spoken of who was "away on business."

Only Marcos didn't look so handsome now. Nor did he look like any businessman. With his fierce black whiskers, heavy guns, and sweat-stained brush jacket, a bandanna which could be pulled up for a mask tied loosely around his neck, he fitted to a T Moira's idea of what the well-turned-out desperado should look like. Young Mr. Marcos Guiterrez interested her more than a little.

Maybe here was her story . . . But a man of such fine family couldn't be an outlaw—or could he?

THERE WAS PAIN in the lustrous dark eyes. "Yes, Mees Birk, it is true. I, Marcos Guiterrez y Romero, have become the *bandido*, the outlaw. Why? Ah, it is a long story. Enough to say I found wicked *compañeros* when I was very young, an' when I owe the big debt of cards—" He shrugged. "We steal cows from across the river. We sell the cows—but then I cannot quit. I must go on—to the end of me. Oh, ever' two, three months—like this night—I slip in to see my *familia* I love so much. But—"

He shook his head; tears came in his eyes. Moira thought of his wife, his boys, now safe in bed, and her heart went out to the young Mexican. She thought of her brother, and begged silently, *Please, God, not Shannon! Help him. Keep him from this!*

"It's awful," she said with feeling. "Can't your father—Don Jaime, can't you help him? You must have money—"

Don Jaime sighed. "Can money buy peace, or happiness? The Rangers, on your side, will not take money. The *rurales*, in Mexico—they want my son in jail. They want his life."

"Then you, Señor Flores! Surely if you talked to Captain Gillett, explained the circumstances—"

Cheno Flores shook his head. "Mos' *probablemente*, he would put me in the jail. All he looks for is one excuse."

"*Why*? You're no outlaw!"

"No, Mees Birk, but Don Jaime and some others—this fat old one—we try to help our people, our country, which is Méjico. To do this we have the *organización*, which is secret. We have no part with the *bandidos* which Marcos—*probrecito!*—is run with. Still the *Rangeros* have call us outlaw and have try to learn who is the head of us."

He grinned at Clint. "Is bad you did not know this when you was the Ranger, Cleent. You could put me in the *calabozo*."

"I damn sure would have, too! Now, since I'm fired, just who is this *jefe misterioso* of your Sons of Mexico outfit? I've been wondering for years."

"That, *señor*, I will not tell you," the fat Mexican said soberly. "I hope you never find this out."

"I will," Clint promised. "I'm that

curious. Marcos, *amigo*, you want to go to your wife and kids. I got the word you wanted to see me, so—"

Marcos looked at Moira, hesitated. "It's all right," Clint said. "Miss Birk wants a piece for the Banner, but I have her promise—have I not, Moira?—to not let the wrong cats out of the bag."

"I'm withdrawing the promise, Clint," Moira said quietly. "Marcos is a wanted outlaw; you're trying your best to become one. Even Señor Flores—a respectable banker, I thought—belongs to some secret organization the Rangers call 'outlaw.' Clint, you promised me a story—but I will leave Marcos's name out of it. He's got a family. As for you—"

"Use my name, by all means!" He gave her a faintly mocking grin. "I need the advertisement, remember? Go ahead, Marcos."

"It is the *Paisano*—the steamboat of *Capitán* Ricardo King. Tomorrow when the sun comes up, it leaves Brownsville with valuable goods for the stores and *ranchos* up the river, and with forty thousan' dollars in gold for Don Ricardo. That is the big prize! At La Bolsa, the bend of the horseshoe, we will jump—but is no use tellin' you this when you are not the Ranger."

"No," Clint said. "Ricardo King's got plenty; let him stand the loss! Damn it, Marcos, I wouldn't have come here if I'd known that was all—"

Marcos sighed deeply. "I am sorry too, my friend. I only thought maybeso if I help the *Rangeros*, they help me sometime. It is hard to live like the wolf in the brush." His big dark eyes called on Moira for sympathy, drew an instant response.

"I'll see that Captain Gillett gets word of this, Marcos! Stops those—those highbinders! I'll see that he knows how you helped the Rangers, too!"

"No, Mees Birk. I am grateful, but that would not be good. Ask Cleent."

"He's right, Moira. We—the Rangers have spies in their camp, and the outlaws have spies everywhere. Mix in this, and you'll get Marcos killed. He's endangered himself coming here tonight, especially if it gets out that you and I—You *didn't* tell anyone?"

"I—I—what could I tell?" Moira demanded. "I didn't even know where we were going, except to Matamoros! Clint, you were a Ranger for five years. Do you mean to say you're going to just—just hold your hands, do nothing, while those bandits hold up a steamboat—probably kill people?"

"I mean just that," Clint said. "*Was* a Ranger is right! Marcos, one thing before I go. Somewhere—likely in Brownsville—there's a man who keeps himself damn well covered, but who is the brains, the master mind behind the whole thieving organization. You've been with his pack, on this side, quite a while, now. Have you any idea who the man is?"

Cheno and Don Jaime, Moira noted, now were watching Marcos intently, but he shook his head.

"Like you say, this man keeps covered up. When a raid is coming—like the *Paisano*—he sends for El Cuchillo to meet him someplace and tells to him the plan. El Cuchillo is the only one who knows this man."

"Who's the messenger boy, then? Who does he send for El Cuchillo?"

Marcos grinned wanly. "His messenger boy is a girl. She pretend to be the sweetheart of El Cuchillo—but I have notice! Each time she comes to camp, and El Cuchillo rides back a ways with

her, pretty quick we go on the raid. Every time, Cleent! And her name is María. You know her. María who sings in the place down the river from Browns—"

"María Sandoval," Clint exclaimed softly. "I ought to know her. Many a miserable night I spent in the brush watching that rats' nest, and all I caught was a crick in my neck. Now—well, maybe through her I can get a message to the high mogul. Make myself a business connection."

He showed Moira that fleeting, sardonic grin. "Ready to go? Looks like you never got much story—that you can use."

They made their good-nights, and Marcos said he would walk with them to the gate. Señor Flores wanted to talk awhile with Don Jaime. "It was most *agradable*, Mees Birk."

"Yes—*sí*—most unexpected." She was thinking, *María Sandoval, messenger for the chief, the jefe misterioso. What was Shannon doing at her place? If he really* was *at her place.*

What could you believe? In a land like this, what could you have faith in? Señor Flores and Don Jaime belonging to a secret band—and of course there had to be two bands. One wasn't enough for Texas! One bunch masquerading as "Sons of Mexico"; the other making no pretense of helping anyone—raiding, robbing, killing! That was the band Marcos rode with, the one Clint hoped to join. It was under the direct leadership of a man called El Cuchillo, which meant "The Knife." But who was the real leader, whose cunning, evil brain planned the band's every move?

"Someone," Moira said aloud, "that I probably know and trust. Damn such a miserable land!"

They were through the gate, moving quickly toward a vague bulk which was the hack, waiting beneath the banana trees.

"Do not curse the land, Mees Birk," Marcos said sadly. "This land I would die for. But the men who despoil it—ah, that is different! Cleent, one word more with you, my friend."

Moira went on to the hack, thinking, *Strange sentiments for him, a hunted outlaw. A strange young man.* She reached for the door handle.

To right and to left of her orange-red flames stabbed from the shadows. Thunderous crashes of gunfire seemed to roll against her with physical force. Without realizing she had moved, she was around, her back to the hack, her hand pressed hard against her mouth.

She saw young Marcos on one knee, his body rocking back a little each time his revolver exploded. She saw Clint, a bit behind Marcos, towering above him, his upper body looking grotesque, distorted through the flame and smoke that billowed from his guns. She heard a man cry out in mortal agony, and then Clint took a stride forward, seemed to settle himself, and was standing over the prone, still shape of his friend, Marcos, and shouting, "Run, Moira! Run!"

She started to run toward him, crying his name aloud. Strong arms caught her and hauled her backward, into the hack.

"*Vamos!* Get us away from here!" a voice that sounded like Killian's shouted.

The hack was already moving, circling back toward the road, gathering speed.

Clint and Marcos back there — and a small boy with dancing eyes. "*Was one time cuatro conejos name Flops, Mops, Cola Algodón, y Pedrocito . . .*" Moira put her face in her hands and wept.

Chapter Six

Heard in the Dark

DON'T CRY. I'M TAKING YOU home. I worried all day. I should never have let you come here . . ."

Killian's voice was soothing, caressing. Finally her sobs ceased, though the sickness stayed in her mind.

"Marcos," she said, "and Clint—"

"Dead, Moira. I saw Marcos go down. And McLain—no man could live through that. Four men—at least four shooting at him. Try to forget it. Men like McLain live by the gun, die by the gun."

"But *who*, Roy? Who would do such a thing?"

"Given a chance like tonight? Moira, there must be a hundred—but stop thinking about it. Perhaps some strong coffee, or—"

"I want to go back there, Roy! We didn't try to help them! We ran away! Tell the driver—"

"No, Moira. We couldn't help. Those are brutal, desperate men. They'd never let us get away again, for fear I might identify some of them. Old Don Miguel's arm is a lot longer than the law's around here. He'd have his revenge for Clint in short order, and those *hombres* know it. I can do one thing, though."

They had reached the main part of town. Killian said something to the driver, and he pulled up before a sizable building, lifted a shout that brought several men in nondescript uniforms hurrying out.

"Mexican police," Killian explained, when they were moving again. "So you quit worrying. I only wish—but it wouldn't sound right, coming from me."

"What wouldn't?" she asked dully.

"About McLain. You know how I felt, but believe me, Moira, I'm sorry for what happened. Those men were murdered, and I never lifted a hand! I—Moira, it's important to me that you understand."

He's dead. You never helped him; nobody did. Clint's dead. Let it go at that. She bit her lip until blood came. Killian was explaining. Words, words . . .

" . . . so my driver lost you and I took a chance, went on to Don Jaime's. Your hack was there, and that was all—no sign of ambushers, nothing. I sent my hack back, and Gordo and I talked a little—even laughed about the poor mouth Clint would make at finding a strange rooster, as Gordo put it, in his private hen coop. That must have been when the trap was set. I never heard them, never suspicioned a thing until you reached the hack and they cut down on Clint and Marcos. All I thought of then was to get you away from there—which I did, thank God!"

They were at the river, stopped; Moira never moved. She was wondering what Clint would have done, in Killian's place. She couldn't see Clint running, from anything. But then she couldn't see Roy running, either. He hadn't run! His first concern was for her safety; that was what had brought him to Mexico. And she should be grateful. She *was* grateful! . . .

"Roy," she said, "did you recognize any of those men?"

"No, Moira"—his eyes were steady. "I'm sorry you had to ask that. I think it gives me the right to a question. What did you hear at Don Jaime's?"

She thought for a moment. Wearily. Clint was dead. Marcos was dead. She couldn't hurt them now. And besides—

"They're going to hold up a steamboat, Roy. A man called *El Cuchillo* . . ." She told it all, then said, "We've got to do something, Roy! You're a deputy—"

"I am," he said grimly, "and the *Paisano* starts upriver at dawn. Let's get across to Texas."

They were on the ferry when he said, close to her ear, "And, Moira, this is important! Don't tell anyone—not anyone. Promise me that."

"All right, I promise. Tell me why."

"Because I'm going to contact Captain Gillett, set a trap at La Bolsa. Even a whisper to the wrong person, and *El Cuchillo* will hold off, we won't bag him. Understand?"

"I understand. And I—I feel better now. Roy, what time is it?"

"About eleven. Why?"

She couldn't believe him. The board walk, the crazy ride in the hack, being chased, and Clint's arms around her, Clint kissing her—three short hours . . .

"Tomorrow is Saturday, Roy. I've got a story to write."

IT WAS THE HARDEST THING she'd ever tried to write, and Uncle Paddy wasn't much help. She had found him in back, stone-sober, working with young Chaco. His small eyes, startlingly blue beneath his white hair, had beamed at her, then instantly changed as he asked, "What's wrong?"

"Everything, Uncle Paddy. Clint—Clint's dead."

"Clint's—dead? Clint McLain?"

She swallowed, nodded dumbly. Chaco let a stick of type clatter on the floor and cried, "No! It is not true!" Then she was in Paddy's arms, sobbing.

"He was a fine, fine lad. 'Paddy, you're drunk,' he says. 'You're drunk, b'Jasus—and with your poor orphan niece—come along, Paddy, 'tis the horse trough for you!' Ah, he had a big heart, that lad. Moira, how did it happen?"

She told him, haltingly. Tears came in his eyes, and Chaco kept crossing himself and muttering, "*Los diablos*," and declaring, "He was brave man, he was good man."

Strange, she thought numbly, how many people agreed with Chaco. Uncle Paddy, Don Jaime—his whole family—the pretty girl in the booth, Izzy the stage driver—everyone except Killian and Captain Gillett and, of course, Hays Jordan. Even Cheno Flores, at Don Jaime's, had seemed friendly to Clint. And thinking back, most of the bad things she'd heard about him had come from Killian.

Roy Killian wasn't liked by everyone, either. When she told about his taking her away from Don Jaime's, Chaco's eyes had glittered and old Paddy had said, "That smooth scoundrel! The back of your hand to him, lass. I don't doubt he was mixed in it—he hated Clint enough."

Then, when she asked why, he had growled, "Ask Chaco."

"Was because of his pardner, Mees Moira—was four years ago, when my seester was but sixteen. This man follow her when she close the shop. He was *muy brutalmente*, he hit her, tear the clothes. So Cleent bring the long blackysnake of Izzy Owenby who drive the stage. Before the hotel, when ever'-body was watchin', he whip this man. When the man is out from jail, he esshoot from behind the adobes and Cleent shoot back and he is dead, this man Drake. So after this, Roy Killian he hates Cleent."

"And your sister—is her name Lupe?"

"Her name is Guadalupe, but she is Lupe, for shorter, an' she sells—"

"I know. Lovely *mantillas*, like this

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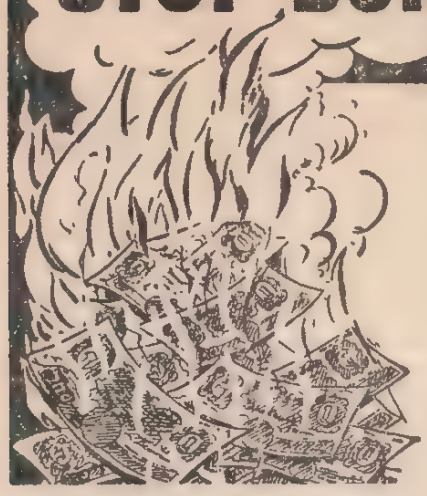

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Dear Sirs,—I wish to thank you for the APAL you sent me some time ago as I have not smoked since. I am sending for one to give a friend.
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Dear Sirs,—It is three months since I purchased my APAL. Two puffs from my APAL and smoking was cured. Thanks again, and again.
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Dear Sirs,—After some delay I wish to report on the success of my APAL. I received it on the 28th February at 08.00 hours and replaced it for a cigarette, and I am happy to say that I have not smoked since. I was a heavy smoker for 10 years.
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Dear Sirs,—I received my APAL only eight days ago, and what A PAL. I stopped smoking right away, no more craving; it's wonderful. I have been burning money for 12 years, now I have the pleasure in banking £1 a week—no more morning coughing.
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Dear Sirs,—I want two APAL sent air-mail for my friends, who were rather surprised of the marvellous effect it had on me when I stopped smoking two years ago. E.F., Tanga

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one." And stooping, she had picked up the *mantilla* she had dropped and put it back around her shoulders. That had been half an hour ago—half a bottle ago, for Paddy—and she still hadn't started the piece she felt compelled to write.

"He deserved killing—that Drake!" she told herself fiercely, aloud.

Old Paddy, staring out the side window into darkness, said, "That he did. Every man Clint killed deserved it, and some that he let live. Lass, go home to bed. I'll write that. Write it plain and brief, the way Clint would have wanted it." She heard the bottle gurgle.

Let him drink, she thought. *He looks like he's lost his best friend.*

She looked down and words from the article she had written this morning seemed to jeer at her:

. . . the famous (or is it infamous?) gun-fighter, Clint McLain . . . The efficient Mr. McLain fired only two shots . . . McLain is no longer with the Texas Rangers . . . McLain killed . . . and almost killed . . . and all because of an ordinary, run-of-the-corral . . .

"I couldn't have!" she cried. She crumpled the yellow sheets and threw them on the floor. "He wasn't like that. He wasn't like that at all!"

"No," Paddy Birk said. "You did just what I intended to do with that hogwash, after I put you straight. Moira lass, I'm glad you're beginning to see him the way he really was instead of the way a few, like Killian, would have you believe. First and last, Clint McLain was a Ranger. On top of that, Clint was a *man;* you could count on him—just like a lot of men have counted on him and called on him for help. Including Captain Gillett and your old Uncle Paddy, to name a couple, and maybe to include you."

"Me?" Moira said. "What—"

"Lass, it was Clint got me to write you, though he wouldn't say why—only that Shannon was heading wrong. And it was Clint loaned me money, kept me going when I couldn't even buy the paper to print the *Banner* on. It was Clint crossed the Rio Grande when *El Cuchillo* had Gillett captured and wanting to swap him for a prisoner the Rangers had. Those butchers would have cut Gillett's throat before they let him go—except Clint took him out of their camp, God only knows how. Guns blazed after 'em clear to the river, but they made it across."

"And after he risked his life, Gillett fired him! Well, I've changed my mind about Captain—"

"Whoa, now, you think a moment," Paddy said. "Start with the conversation at the Ranger camp. Would you expect that kind of talk from men like Gillett and Clint? I wouldn't. I think they trumped it up for the benefit of Izzy Owenby, and seeing you, Flores, and Killian there only made it better. Then that 'ad' Clint gave you. Clint McLain wouldn't have needed to advertise for any connection. Then taking you to Matamoros to see young Marcos, fresh from *El Cuchillo's* camp! Ever stop to think *why* Clint took you there?"

"I never—he told me—he promised me a story. And—and maybe he just wanted my company."

"Yes, but besides your company, he wanted you to see him on friendly terms with an outlaw. That was the 'story' he promised you, and no matter what promise he got from you in return, he wanted you to print it. He expected you to print it. You see?"

"Y-yes—" Her lips began to quiver. "He took me for a simpleton. Not even

a v-very honest one. He wanted me to write bad things about him. To say he was f-fired from the Rangers, consorting with outlaws. Uncle Paddy, do you honestly think all that was just a—a show? That he wasn't fired at all?"

"I think," Paddy said, "that Dallas Gillett would've cut off his right arm before he'd have fired Clint. I think the whole thing was a put-up job. It wouldn't fool the high chief, whoever he is. But it might loosen the tongues of some of the smaller fry—like Marcos Guiterrez. What did Marcos have to say to Clint?"

The *Paisano* . . . *El Cuchillo* . . . La Bolsa Bend . . . Moira wanted to tell him the whole thing. Instead, she told herself, *Clint never trusted you; nobody will! At least, keep your promise to Roy. He's a deputy.*

She shook her head. "I can't tell you, Uncle Paddy. It was—I made a promise."

"To Clint?"

She shook her head again. It was all so confusing. Now she didn't even trust Roy, entirely.

"I don't know what to believe, Uncle Paddy. I—I hope Clint wasn't fired, but I just don't know. I'm beginning to think he was a—a mighty fine man. He must have been! Only—"

"Only what, lass?"

"Only he was a killer. I do know that."

"So was I a killer! So was your father. When it's kill or be killed—I guess I killed half a dozen poor lads, your daddy right beside me, at Antietam. Been killing whisky bottles ever since."

"That was different! Clint got paid for—for shedding blood. Maybe he even liked to."

"Girl, without men like Clint—the Texas Rangers—I'd hate to think what this country would come to. Think it over, lass. Then write your story. Then go to bed."

"I—guess you're right, Uncle Paddy. I can see how Clint—"

She took up her pencil, thought, *Straight out, no frills—the way Clint was*, and without hesitation, she began to write:

Ranger Clint McLain and Marcos Guiterrez, son of a prominent Matamoros citizen, were shot from ambush last Friday night on the outskirts of Matamoros. Young Guiterrez was seen to fall, and it is almost a certainty that both men were killed. Mexican police are investigating the shooting. Four men or more took part in the ambush. McLain had been visiting in the home of Don Jaime Guiterrez . . .

It didn't take long to finish it. She hung the two sheets on the hook beside the desk, and was halfway to the door when Paddy called, "Right to bed now. You look half dead."

Half dead, she thought numbly. *Clint is dead. They're both dead. I should have written it that way.*

THE HOUSE WAS DARK. Approaching it, she tried to walk lightly so as not to wake Shannon. She eased the door open a crack and thin lamplight fell across her face. Quite distinctly she heard a low, throaty, coaxing voice, and thought irritably, *What now?* She was beat-out, incapable of surprise even when she realized that the voice was a woman's.

" . . . So it is the biggest job *El Jefe* has have," the woman was saying. "The two of you are the—the key to the whole works! I tell you there is no danger — and the cut will be—*magnifico!*"

"And I tell you I'm in no shape for any job. You tell *El Jefe* that, for me. And another thing. Where's my cut from the last job? When I hear some cash money jingling, maybe I'll talk some more business—and maybe—maybe I—"

Moira missed the rest of it, because a great roaring came in her ears. She rested her forehead against the door and squeezed hard on the knob, while inside her something lost and lonesome cried, *Shannon, Shannon!*

"*Ho,*" the woman said, making it big and round and derisive. "Was peanuts, that job! A few gons, a few—Shannon, listen you to me. This time you don' even ride the horse. Your part takes only a few minutes, when the boat reach La Bolsa, and—*poof!* We go to Monterrey, to Méjico City—jus' you an' me! I bet you this Pete he is not miss it, eh, Perico? What you say?"

"I say, hell, yes! Only I'm like Shannon on one thing—*El Jefe's* got to show himself—anyway to Shan and me. If he can't trust us that far, we can't trust him. Anything goes wrong—like it damn near did on that freight-wagon job—and we'll be the goats, while the big boy goes free. We won't have it that way! You tell that to *El Jefe.*"

"I will, Perico! I promise! This time, I tell you, not one thing can go wrong, and before the nex' time—"

"Well—all right," Shannon gave in. "I'm weak as a cat. Likely start bleedin' again. But for a thousand dollars—María, if you're lying about this being the last job, about going to Mexico—"

Shannon, Shannon, the voice kept crying. Moira stood there undecided, her mind refusing to work. That woman, María—María Sandoval, go-between, probably mistress of the man behind the terrible crimes committed by *El Cuchillo's* bunch—it had to be her in there, coaxing, cajoling, lying to Shannon! Moira wanted to rush in and plead with Shannon; she wanted to have that woman before her, wanted to beat María Sandoval until she was senseless.

Only that wouldn't help Shannon. He was stubborn, resentful. He never had quite grown up.

She heard the kitchen door squeak. The woman was leaving. Perhaps all three of them were leaving. She whirled and ran through the darkness. She had to find help . . .

Clint, you could help me! You could tell me what to do!

She ran past two houses. The man was waiting in deep shadow beside the third house. He stepped in front of her and she ran square into his arms. Her heart gave a convulsive leap, then the man said, "Moira!"

She began to shake. Several moments later she said, "I'm glad it's you, Roy. I—I guess I was looking for you."

Chapter Seven

River Ambush

SHE HADN'T SLEPT; her head felt heavy and dull; the rest of her was numb. Like some wild creature, crouched and entirely still except for a slight shivering which she could not control, she stood in thorny brush behind the stall where, a few hours ago, Clint McLain had bought the *mantilla* that covered her shoulders. Through a dismal down-drip she watched a vague gray bulk, some forty yards out from the bank, slowly take the shape of a small steamship—the *Paisano*—squat and unlovely with bulging side wheels, riding at anchor beneath a thin smudge of smoke.

For the past hour, five small skiffs had been carrying cargo to the steamer, the Mexican loaders, just below Moira, working by lantern light. Neither Pete nor Shannon had gone out to the ship; and now all the skiffs but one were tied at the loading platform, and she saw the last one coming in. Hope flickered alive in her. Maybe they had changed their minds. Maybe Roy had found them, talked some sense into them, else surely Roy would have shown up before—

Someone was coming down the walk. She peered past the corner of the stall and through the gray drizzle saw Roy Killian stride swiftly by and go on down to the loading platform. He reached there just as the last skiff was nosing in, said something to the two Mexicans rowing it, and next minute they were rowing back toward the *Paisano*, Killian with them.

Moira, watching him go, wanted to bawl . . . *"Don't worry, girl. If I can't find those two young idiots, talk some sense into them, I'll go with them up-river. I don't know how, but I'll keep them out of trouble."*

There in the darkness he had made that promise after she had told him about María Sandoval and what she had heard, the whole wretched story.

"Cozening wench!" he had growled. "Too many know she's *El Jefe's* woman, now. You, Shannon, Pete, Don Jaime—*El Jefe* will have to get rid of her."

"Cheno Flores, too. I forgot to tell you—"

"What's that? What about Cheno?"

"He was at Don Jaime's. He heard what Marcos said about María Sandoval. I didn't think it was important, so—"

"It could be mighty important—to *El Jefe*. Because Cheno is a sort of *'teniente* in The Sons of Mexico, and knowing about the *Paisano* job, no telling what that bunch might do . . . Here's your house, and all dark, dearest girl. You get some sleep now, and forget Shannon. I'll look after him."

But she hadn't slept, hadn't tried to. She had waited, hoping Shannon would return. He hadn't, so—here she was. And her next move was clear. Shannon was either on that ship or soon would be, else Killian wouldn't be here. He was going to try to keep Shannon and Pete out of trouble, and Sister Moira was going to be right there helping him try!

Lord, just let me have some good black coffee.

THE COFFEE WAS BLACK ENOUGH, but it wasn't good. Moira drank only three cups of it—in the *Paisano*'s cramped galley, with Captain Vargas—"Call me Raoul"—smiling at her while Killian fumed.

What was she doing here? She might get hurt. She was going ashore, to bed, before she dropped asleep where she sat!

Moira took another swallow of coffee, then told him straight out that he might as well hush.

"I'm going where Shannon goes, Roy. I came all the way from St. Louis to help him if he needed me. I certainly don't intend to fail him now."

"You didn't talk that way last night," Killian reminded her with some bitterness. "It was 'Help me, Roy, help me!' Damn it, I'm trying to! But if I have to worry about you while—"

"I know, Roy, and I'm grateful. Believe me, I am. I trust you. I know you'll do everything in your power to—to keep your promise to me. Only—

Shannon is all the brother I have. I'd be half crazy waiting and doing nothing. So I'm going with you, Roy. I have to go!"

He put his hand over hers. "Of course, girl. I was just afraid something might—it won't, though. I won't let you get hurt. Right now, Moira, I want you to lie down, even if you can't sleep. Raoul—"

"*Ciertamente, señor!* Mees Birk can have my own cabin . . . And this Shannon, this brother—do not worry for him, Mees Birk. He came on board before daylight with Pete McLain. They are in the other cabin, asleep like babies."

"Oh, thank you, Captain Vargas," Moira said warmly. "He's been wounded. He needs sleep."

Moira did too, but sleep would not come to her. She lay on the captain's narrow bunk, feeling it roll a little, hearing the slap-slap of waves against the thin hull, the intermittent hiss of escaping steam, the pounding of the walking beam that was driving the *Paisano* nearer to La Bolsa Bend with each stroke.

She wondered if Killian had sent word to Captain Gillett. She should have asked him. Not knowing what lay ahead was the worst part of waiting! Surely he had, though. He couldn't hope to save the *Paisano* without help. . . . But if the Rangers were waiting to trap *El Cuchillo's* bunch, what would happen to Shannon and Pete?

So many things could go wrong! They could be arrested, shot, killed. They had only to lift a hand against the Rangers to be in trouble. And even if they kept out of the fight, if Killian could keep them out of it, still a lot of things could go against them. Cuchillo or some of his men might talk, connect Shannon and Pete with the bandits.

She almost wished she hadn't told Roy about Shannon and Pete. About María Sandoval, the *Paisano*. Anything. Then Rangers wouldn't be waiting at La Bolsa Bend. Shannon, after this job, had planned to go to Mexico. He would be safe there. He wasn't a bad boy, really. Like Marcos Guiterrez, he had fallen in with bad companions. If anything happened to him—

Moira buried her face in the pillow. *God, dear God, I wish Clint was here! I wouldn't be half so afraid if Clint was here.*

She was still wishing when sleep took her and dropped her into blackness. She woke like one emerging from anesthesia. Someone, she thought dreamily, was shooting firecrackers. Yelling, too. Better go see about it. No telling what Shannon and those young brats would get in—

Shannon! She sprang from the bunk and peered through the open side window. This morning's drizzle had turned into a real rain that slanted down from ugly, leaden clouds, and through the rain, across sluggish brown water, she saw an almost solid wall of mesquite brush sliding by. She saw huge sombreros bobbing, the riders beneath them hidden by the brush, flashes from their guns seeming to hang in the mesquite like brief-lived orange blooms.

Moira held there for several moments, fascinated, while rain beat in on her face and bullets whacked into the *Paisano's* tough wood. Splinters erupted from the window casing. Bits of wood stung her face.

The riders strung along the riverbank suddenly seemed closer. Then she realized that the *Paisano* was angling toward them, toward the bank. She whirled and ran to the door and found it locked.

She lunged against it, shouted. Then, casting about her, she saw a heavy chair. She swung it up by its back and, with all her strength, began battering the door. The third blow splintered an upper panel, and she reached through the opening, found a bolt and shot it back.

Shannon was the first person she saw when she ran out onto the deck—and her breath caught in her throat. There were several persons on the deck, but in that first glance all she saw was her brother, his set face dirty-gray beneath its fuzz of whiskers, a long blued-steel gun projecting from his fist.

"*Shannon,*" she said, "*Shannon.*"

The words came out little more than a whisper, but she knew he heard them, for she saw a muscle twitch along his jaw, saw him swallow. The gun he held didn't move. He didn't speak. It was Roy Killian who said, "Moira! Get back in the cabin!"

Hope surged up in her. Then she saw Killian—and Captain Vargas and two crew members—to her right, near the deck rail. They had their hands raised. Shannon's gun was holding them that way. Killian had failed her—Killian, who was going to keep Shannon out of trouble. What could she do? What could anyone do?

"Put that wheel over harder, Mexican!"

She looked up and saw Pete, just above Shannon, in the wheelhouse door. She could see his elbow, up and out a little from his body, though she couldn't see his gun. She didn't need to. The whole thing was clear.

The "key," María Sandoval had called them. She should have called them fools, idiots! They were taking the *Paisano* to the Mexico bank, where *El Cuchillo* and his cutthroats were waiting. Where it would be easy for them to plunder the ship, maybe kill the crew. Shannon and Pete both would be branded "criminal," wanted by the Rangers. What could she do to stop them?

She could see the bandits plain enough, now. They had come out of the brush, were waiting at the edge of the bank, in the rain, forty or fifty of them. The *Paisano*, with Pete's gun in command, was heading straight toward the bandits.

Moira moved toward Shannon. He was watching Killian and the other three men so intently that he never saw her until she stopped. Then she was square in front of him.

"Give me that gun, Shannon," she said quietly, and reached for it.

She would never forget the way he looked at her. Shock in his face, and a kind of sickness.

"Sis! My God, where did you—"

She had hold of the gun's long barrel. She heard a boot scrape behind her, saw Shannon's nostrils pinch white, his eyes go wild; his voice came with a sobbing sound: "You'll get us both killed!"

He hauled back on the gun, his whole body turning. His hooked left arm caught her and hurled her to one side. She fell with her side and outstretched arm across a coiled cable; that way she saw Pete, half around and looking down from the wheelhouse doorway. She hardly recognized Killian's voice, clear and cold with authority:

"Drop it, you young fool!"

She cried, "No, Roy!" And Shannon was swinging his gun back, to line on Killian. Killian's Colt barrel caught the side of Shannon's head and dropped him to the deck.

"Killian!" Pete McLain said.

The threat he put into that one word held Moira poised, ready to drop to her knees beside Shannon. From the tail of her eye she saw Killian's Colt lifting and she tipped her head back, saw Pete on the steps, halfway between wheelhouse and deck, his gun slanted down at Killian. Without knowing she moved, she stopped and grasped Shannon by the arm and dragged him along the deck.

She was backing crabwise, both hands clamped on Shannon's wrist. She heard two thunderous, swift shots that seemed to come from behind her. Then she saw a strange thing happen.

One moment Killian, there in front of her, had a gun pointed upward at Pete; next moment the gun was gone, Killian was staring down at his hand in a wondering way that was almost comical. This while the *Paisano*, like some blind thing, plowed through the rain with the brushy bank ahead, and Pete McLain let go a startled yell.

"You've still got a foot, Pete. That slug hit the step you're standin' on. The next one—let the gun go, damn you, or you'll be wonderin' where it went, like Killian! Maybe have nubs for fingers!"

Pete dropped the gun, but Moira still couldn't believe it—that voice. Pete looked as if he couldn't believe it either, as if this couldn't happen to him. He was staring past her, and he licked his lips and said, "You! How in the name of God—" Then his voice failed him completely.

Shannon was mumbling, trying to sit up. Moira let go of his wrist and turned slowly and looked. There were three cabins on the deck besides the wheelhouse, and the man she saw stood with his back to the nearest one. He had a rag bandage wound around his head, like a turban; his left arm was in a bandanna sling; he needed a shave. His eyes and the gun he held both looked wicked and ready for anything that might come. The gun still dribbled smoke.

Moira stood looking at him. Bandage and bandanna, threatening eyes and ready gun—he made the most welcome sight she had seen in her entire life. She took a step toward him and said, "*Clint!*"

The deck shivered beneath her feet. That was her only warning. Next instant, as the *Paisano* came to a jarring stop, she pitched backward and sprawled across Shannon's legs. Pots and pans in the galley rattled, banged, crashed. Captain Vargas lifted an anguished cry: "*Aiee!* The bottom she is bost out!"

On hands and knees, Moira heard triumphant yells from the mob on the riverbank. Guns began slamming again. A Mexican crewman near her coughed, clawed at his chest with both hands, and toppled against the deck railing.

Suddenly the ship was surrounded by horsemen, their boots in the silt-brown water, the peaks of their sombreros reaching almost to the level of the deck. They were yelling, brandishing revolvers.

One fierce-whiskered rascal, his hot eyes staring at Moira, stood in the saddle, caught hold of the rail and pulled himself on up. He had one leg over the rail and was grinning at Moira around a knife clamped between his teeth in Spanish Main fashion when she snatched up the six-shooter Shannon had dropped.

She was fully as surprised as the bandit was when the gun went off. He fell backward, still grinning, and she heard the splash as he hit the water.

"Good shooting!" Clint's voice said, and he was on his knee beside her.

"God save me," she said, "I've killed a man!"

"A pity you didn't, but you only gouged his shoulder. I was fixing to drive that knife down his—"

The gun he was holding came alive with deafening sound. Forward, where the *Paisano's* nose was jammed into the soft bank, raiders were swarming over the rail, but they lost enthusiasm as Clint's bullets cut into them; most of them dropped back onto the bank, while four or five more eager ones ran toward the wheelhouse, seeking protection from Clint's merciless fire. They left three dead ones behind them.

"Someday invent a gun holds more ca'tridges," Clint grumbled; he holstered his empty gun and reached across for its mate, on his left thigh. "We got to go from here, girl—somewhere! Get behind me and get ready. Soon as I—give 'em something—to think about."

During that speech, three bullets from his gun cleared the foredeck of raiders. But they could afford caution, sure of the outcome of this little affair.

For in each direction Moira looked she could see bandits. Their whiskered faces grinning. Their big hats fringing the deck, bobbing like monstrous fishing corks. They were yelling, laughing, having a good time of this, since it was a game they couldn't lose. Occasionally one would stand in the stirrups and carelessly whip a shot across the deck.

Neither Captain Vargas nor any of his crew was in sight. They had ducked for it, Moira guessed. Even the one who had caught the slug in his chest had disappeared—likely had fallen over the rail.

She glanced up and saw young Pete, in the wheelhouse doorway, firing down methodically. Once—twice she saw him fire, and her heart warmed to him a little. Then she saw that he was shooting at Killian, who was flat on his belly behind the coil of cable, Pete's gunwork keeping him pinned there.

All of this was happening fast. Moira wondered wildly how much longer it would be before the raiders got tired of playing, got down to business. She wondered which one of them was *El Cuchillo*.

And where were the Rangers? Roy had promised to get word to them. He—

Moira put her hand under Clint's chin and tipped his head back, so that he would see Pete. She shouted against the racket of the guns.

"Can't you stop him, Clint? He'll kill Roy. He'll be a murderer as well as an outlaw."

Clint stood straight up and shouted Pete's name. Pete looked down, grinning, saw Clint, and the grin froze.

"Come down from there, Pete! Come down, or I'm going up after you!"

When Pete was slow to move, Clint sent a shot drilling into the doorframe beside his head. Pete came down. Immediately Killian got to his feet and hurried over to Moira. The look he gave Clint was murderous.

"You trying to get her killed? Come on, Moira," and he caught her arm. "Get you in a cabin! I don't think they'll harm—"

"Shut up," Clint said. He was staring forward. "That's *El Cuchillo*. He wants to powwow."

Killian reached and took the gun from Moira's hand. The gun she had forgotten—the gun with which she had shot a man . . .

Chapter Eight

Tough Breed

MOIRA LOOKED ON THE MAN, *El Cuchillo*, for the first time. His horse was gaudy, red and white; his saddle, bridle, the short jacket he wore, were all heavy with silver. His face was heavy, an Indian face, the color of mahogany, with high, broad cheekbones and intensely bright black eyes. He sat still in the saddle, past the *Paisano*'s bow, and he smiled.

He said, "So we meet again, Señor Clint"—just that flat statement, no malice in it, nothing.

"So we meet again, Cuchillo," Clint said. "Now what?"

"Now?" Again he smiled, but there was no mirth in it. "Now, señor, there is the small matter of my brother. The *Rangeros* killed my brother. You came to my camp and took Capitán Gillett, and then the *Rangeros* killed my brother. But I make a bargain with you, Clint. What do you say?"

"I'm listening," Clint said.

"The señorita beside you, your brother Pete, and the young *hombre* Shannon, who now tries to stand on his feet—these people and the Señor Killian I do not wish to harm. Let them go to one cabin. You, Clint, come with us. This is all I ask. What say you, Clint?"

That cruel, expressionless face, the way he looked at Clint—it came over Moira within the space of a breath. He would not hurt her or Killian, nor Pete, nor Shannon. But he intended to kill Clint. It was an eye for an eye . . .

She didn't cry out or grab Clint. She put her hand on his arm and said, "No, Clint."

Young Pete, beside Clint, said, "Clint—*El Cuchillo*—I never intended—Clint, he'll kill you!"

"He's your boss, isn't he, Pete? Kind of late to be thinking what kind of man he is."

He started forward, but Pete caught his arm. "Clint, I never—listen to me, Clint! I owed a little money, then—Clint, I've been near crazy wondering if you saw me on that Smiley Mason job. Shannon and I, we never figured to get in this deep. It was just—"

Clint said coldly, "If I'd seen you on the Smiley Mason job, you'd know about it. You'd be under arrest. Let go my arm."

Pain was in the young face of Pete McLain. Clint shook him off and started toward *El Cuchillo*.

"Hold on, Cuchillo. I accept your proposition."

Only Moira knew that he hadn't. His right arm was out a bit, hand near the handle of his gun. He intended to kill El Cuchillo, and he *would* kill him. Then Cuchillo's men—

"Clint!" she cried, and she took a step toward him. Then she heard wild yells. Guns began slamming.

El Cuchillo's men, most of them, had gathered around him near the bow of the ship. From behind them, from the brush, riders appeared. They seemed to sprout from the brush. All of them yelling, shooting.

The Rangers! she thought. And then she saw the huge man on the beautiful black horse—a man with a red beard and a magnificent, musical, booming voice, who shouted:

"Hit 'em where they live! Low and in the guts, men! Murder my boy Clint! Damn their souls to hell, pulverize 'em!"

Clint was moving toward *El Cuchillo*. And beside El Cuchillo now there was

a man with a yellow mustache that reminded Moira of sunflowers bobbing in the wind. The rain had stopped. The entire scene was clear. There were so many of them—they couldn't miss Clint!

She forgot Shannon, forgot Pete and Roy Killian. She ran to catch up with Clint and hold him, and a big hand came out of the sky and slammed her to the deck. She heard Clint's voice, not loud but clear, heard it above the rattle of guns, the yelling.

"Who's your friend beside you, Cuchillo? Hays Jordan, last night in Matamoros you tried to murder me. Tried to murder my friend, Marcos Guiterrez. He might die yet—"

The blackness had passed and Moira, on her hands and knees, saw Clint going steadily forward, going toward *El Cuchillo* and the man with the yellow mustache. She saw guns spurting flame. *El Cuchillo* was shooting at Clint, Hays Jordan was shooting at him. He kept moving.

El Cuchillo's men were spurring away behind him. She saw Clint's father, Don Miguel, stand in the stirrups, swing a lariat and jerk a man from the saddle. She thought she glimpsed Captain Gillett with his silky mustache and imperial, a gun in his hand, a look of triumph on his face. But she must have imagined that—as she imagined she saw Uncle Paddy on a saddled mule chasing one of *El Cuchillo's* men into the brush.

She didn't imagine Pete and Shannon, though. Suddenly they were there, beside Clint, and Clint was down and Hays Jordan's yellow mustache had become a crimson crescent.

All this Moira saw, and her heart swelled because Shannon was trying to do the right thing. And she was trying to crawl toward Clint, with the voice of Roy Killian, somewhere close, saying:

"Moira! Moira, are you hit bad! Get you away from here!"

She dropped into a well without bottom . . .

THERE WAS UNCLE PADDY, his blue eyes concerned, saying, "Girl! Lass, are you all right?" There was Roy Killian, on the other side of her, saying, "Moira, dearest girl . . ."

"Clint," she said. "Clint—"

And she sat up and was still on the deck of the *Paisano*. She looked straight into the eyes of a Mexican girl, a really beautiful girl, with eyes like soot, hair that caught the late sun's rays and burned like polished ebony.

Uncle Paddy said, "After you told me about Clint, I got out the paper, then headed for the Del Sol. I thought Don Miguel ought to know about Clint. Halfway there, I ran into them. Don Miguel and Cheno Flores. We stopped by Concha's place, picked up this girl, María Sandoval. It seems that Cheno Flores already had told Don Miguel. About the *Paisano*. About María. The ambush of Clint. Everything. So them and me—the Sons of Mexico—we headed here to La Bolsa Bend. We—"

"They and I," Moira said. "Watch your grammar, Uncle Paddy."

And Clint's father, Don Miguel, was glaring at Captain Dallas Gillett.

"We are the Sons of Mexico, sir, and I am proud! I lead these men. We had hoped, some day, to see all this land go back to Mexico. We fight for what is right! We saved this ship, the *Paisano;* now you tell me that my son Pete is under arrest. You tell me he is an outlaw. I tell you no! You will not arrest him!"

Two lines of them, the Rangers, the

Sons of Mexico, grim and hostile men facing one another. And between the lines, going away from Moira, moved a tall figure, Clint McLain. He moved toward the bow of the ship where several Rangers were holding some prisoners—*El Cuchillo* and some of his men and a girl with burnished hair. He went up to María Sandoval and caught her shoulders.

Beside Moira, Shannon groaned. And young Pete McLain said, "Sorry wench! Look at her, Shan. Your girl friend. She got you into this. Now she'll put a noose around our necks."

"Shut up, Pete!" Shannon said.

"Moira," Roy Killian said urgently, "you're bleeding—your shoulder. Come on, girl, I'll get you to a cabin."

He put his arm around her but she wouldn't budge. She was watching Clint —and María Sandoval.

"Woman," Clint was saying, "you're going to tell me. You're going to name *El Jefe*, the snake you work for, if I have to break your neck." And he was shaking her. Savagely. Violently.

Past his shoulder, María saw Killian with his arm around Moira. She said, "Hah! I tell you! That—that dog is lie to me! There is *El Jefe*, I swear to it! The big Señor Killian! That is the man!"

Moira was stunned. She couldn't believe it. But Clint had turned, was pacing back between the lines of men, and the look on his face was implacable. And Killian was up, waiting for him.

Dallas Gillett said sharply, "Clint!"

Clint said, "I won't murder him, Cap'n. I'll just—arrest him."

Killian murmured so that only Moira, and perhaps Pete and Shannon, could hear: "I'm sorry you had to know, my dear."

Moira saw why Clint had fallen a minute ago. He had lost a boot heel. It had been shot away, she guessed. He walked, with a limp, toward Roy Killian.

"Whenever you're ready, Roy. One thing I'd like to know, though. You and Cheno Flores. The night Smiley Mason got jumped."

"It was like he said, McLain. I wanted to buy those cows. I also wanted an alibi for that night—proof of my whereabouts when my boys hit Smiley. As far as Cheno was concerned, it was a plain business deal."

"Thanks," Clint said, and kept moving. "Cheno thanks you, too."

"All right," Killian said, and the gun in his hand—the one he had taken from Moira—came whipping up, exploded.

Flame and sound came from the gun in Clint's hand. Clint staggered, came on. Roy Killian was down, a sprawled shape on the *Paisano's* deck, dead.

Clint came on until he stood above the man he had killed. He looked down at what had been *El Jefe*, and then he looked at Moira.

"I'm sorry, girl," he said. "If you loved him, I'm sorry."

Then he turned and walked away from her, limping on his one boot heel, weaving a little because blood was pumping from his side, where Killian's slug had clipped him. Back between the two lines he went, between the Rangers and Cuchillo's men, and *El Cuchillo* saw him coming.

"Might as well make a clean sweep, Cuchillo," he said. "*El Jefe*, now you. *Hombre* get yourself a gun. Somebody give him a gun."

Fear seemed frozen on the Mexican's face. He cried "*Por Dios, no!* I am not armed! I beg of you!"

"You'd better beg " Clint said. "You'd better plead your case with a higher

court than me. Because I'm deaf. I can't hear you. Hays Jordan and you and Roy Killian. I hold you responsible for my brother Pete turning outlaw, and for Shannon. I hold you responsible for murdering Smiley Mason's lad, young Jerry Jones, I hold you responsible for most all the murdering and thieving that's been going on along the lower Rio Grande.

"But the big thing, Cuchillo, is my friend Marcos Guiterrez. Last night, in Matamoros, you buckos tried to murder me, and Marcos might die yet. Marcos is my friend. Marcos is a Texas Ranger. Has been for a long time, undercover. And *hombre*, the Texas Rangers look after their own!"

Captain Gillett said, "Clint! He's a prisoner! He'll get what he deserves—but you back off."

El Cuchillo broke clear of the Rangers surrounding him. He reached toward his boot and came up with a stubby, wicked little gun. Clint's gun was out and up and the Rangers fell away, leaving Clint and *El Cuchillo* with plenty of room.

That was when young Pete McLain cried, "Stand clear! All of you! Shannon and me are leaving here! Stand clear!"

No one had noticed; all eyes had been watching Clint. Pete and Shannon had edged around Cuchillo's men, along the rail, and now they were at the *Paisano's* bow, and on the Mexico bank were horses. Pete had a gun and Shannon had a gun. Shannon was as pale as a man could get, only his eyes alive. Young Pete's face was a mask of fury.

"Stand back! Stand clear! All of you! Shan and me are riding out of here! Before God, the first man that reaches for a gun—"

Moira was up, Uncle Paddy's hand gripping her arm. In vivid pictures on the screen of her mind she saw Shan in his crib taking milk from a bottle. Shan in dresses toddling around the house. *Doggie. Pretty doggie. Bow-wow. Bow-wow*—his first words. And then his first boy friends, his first girl friends . . . and then he was almost grown, going to Texas, and then Uncle Paddy was worrying about him, writing about him.

"Shan—oh, *Shan!*"

"Give me that gun, Pete. You're under arrest," Clint said, and took a limping step.

Red-bearded Don Miguel shouted, "Clint! Leave that boy be, or by the eternal—"

"Keep away from me, Clint!" Pete cried. "Damn you, don't make me kill you! Keep away!"

"You broke the law, kid. And I'm a Texas Ranger." Clint kept moving.

Shannon moved to one side. He brought the gun to full cock. It made a sharp metallic sound.

These boys were desperate. Desperate and dangerous. More dangerous than *El Cuchillo*, who was a bit behind them, warily backing away from Clint. *El Cuchillo* had almost reached the bow rail. Across that rail were horses. Clint kept moving, limping.

A wildness came in young Pete's eyes. He cried in a sobbing way, "Damn you, Clint! You're so high and mighty! I've been jealous of you, and proud of you, all my life! But now—by the Lord—"

Suddenly he threw his gun as if it had been a rock, a hated thing, threw it at Clint and began sobbing.

"It won't be so bad, boy," Clint said, and his voice was tender. He shoved his gun forward and with arm and gun, almost gently, boosted Pete to one side.

The stubby, wicked little weapon *El Cuchillo* had pulled from his boot barked spitefully, no louder than a cap pistol, and Clint swayed and dropped. Shannon's cry was a shrill sound. His gun was already cocked and he turned and shot the bandit at almost point-blank range, and afterward kept sobbing.

"He was a man. He was Pete's brother. He was a good man. A good man . . ."

He *was* a good man, and he wasn't dead. Moira made sure of that. She sat on the *Paisano's* wet deck and held Clint's head in her lap and St. Louis was far, far away.

They all gathered round. Captain Gillett, Don Miguel, Señor Flores, young Pete, and many more men. They all looked down at Clint and some of them had tears in their eyes.

Captain Gillett said, "Clint, Clint, old horse—" Then his voice choked up.

Uncle Paddy said, "The best damn' Ranger, the best damn' man on the Rio Grande. The best damn' man in the whole wide—" He got out a handkerchief and blew into it hard.

Clint opened his eyes and smiled. "You'd think somebody was dead. You can't kill a Texas Ranger! They're like old elephants. They just wander away when—ah, Moira, Moira. Girl, quit your crying. Will you wait for me, Moira? I think I'm going away for a while, but I'll be back. Will you be here, girl?"

"I'll be here," Moira said. "Wild horses couldn't drag me away. I'll be here, Clint. But—but don't stay too long."

"Fine," he murmured through gray lips. "Wonderful!" And his eyes found Captain Gillett's. "Cap, one favor. It maybe isn't according to law. Cap—when I get back from this little *pasear*, I want—I want Shannon and Pete put in my charge. On parole, you might say. Cap—can you hear me?"

"I hear you, Clint. I'll get them off on a suspended sentence. I'll put them in your custody. I promise you that. And if—if that trail of yours just goes one way, I'll take charge of them myself."

"Thanks, Cap. But—I'll be back. Moira—I've got you to—come back to—haven't I?"

"Yes, darling," she whispered, and bent down and kissed him on the lips. "You've got a lot of things to come back to."

A little man was there beside them, a little man she remembered. The doctor who had looked after Shannon. Swiftly he made his examination. He shook his head.

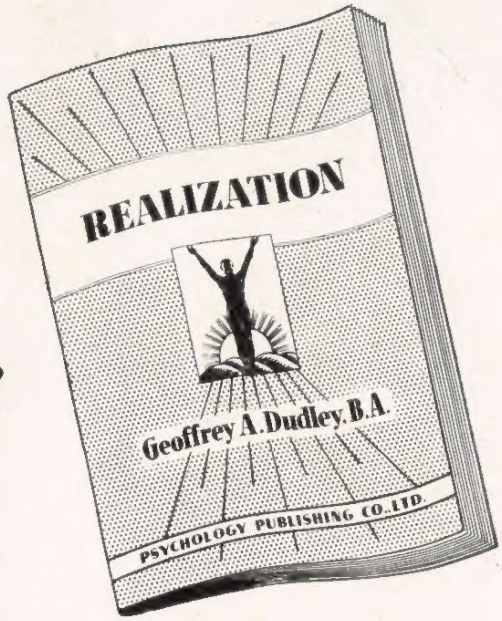
"*Quien sabe?* Who knows? He has caught this one beneath his right lung. But—"

"Doctor, you've got to pull him through!" Moira said. "I couldn't live without him. I couldn't go on. Please!"

"Then we will pull him through. This one, he is tough. All these *Rangeros* are tough."

Moira was shaking her head and saying fiercely, "Antietam! Antietam!" And then she said, "Thank God they are tough; I wouldn't want any weakling. But I think I can handle him all right."

THE END



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